PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 340

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1999–2000

COMPRISING PERIOD
29 November—9 December 1999

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HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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29 November 1999

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 340**

SECOND VOLUME OF SESSION 1999–2000

House of Commons

Monday 29 November 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Child Support Agency (Poverty)

1. **Mr. Chris Pond** (Gravesham): What assessment he has made of the likely impact of the reform of the Child Support Agency on child poverty. [98745]

9. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What assessment he has made of the impact of the planned reform of the Child Support Agency on the income of the poorest lone parents. [99069]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): More than 1 million children will benefit from the reforms. More non-resident parents will support their children. A total of 600,000 children in the poorest families will gain more than £150 million a year because parents will be able to keep an extra £10 a week.

Mr. Pond: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that the maintenance disregard on working families tax credit provides a positive incentive for both parents to co-operate fully with the CSA? Non-resident parents will see that every penny they provide in maintenance will go to the child, and not a penny to the Treasury, while parents with care will see that the money will be of total benefit to them. Is not that one of the major factors in ensuring that CSA reform contributes to the Government's agenda of eliminating child poverty in two decades?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. One of the weaknesses of the previous system was that many parents did not feel that the money that they paid was going into the hands of the parent with care and, therefore, into the hands of the children. We want to ensure that far more children gain. We introduced the disregard so that parents on income support can keep up to £10 a week, which will make a big difference to their children. As he says, it will go a long way towards our objective of eradicating child poverty within 20 years and halving it within 10.

Fiona Mactaggart: Is my right hon. Friend aware that one in three children are in poverty and that, of those, many are likely to be children of separated parents? Will he ensure that, under the new system, the delay in deciding the award for children will be ended? At present, 67 per cent. of decisions are not made within the 22-week target. What will the target be under the new system?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend makes two good points. First, of 1.5 million children on the CSA's books, only 300,000 are directly seeing the benefit of child support. Secondly, she is right to say that the children who live in families that have broken up are more likely to be poor.

The advantage of the new system, whereby we will require some three to four pieces of information, rather than nearly 100, will mean that the maintenance calculation can be made within days of an application, rather than within months, or sometimes years under the

present system. Not only will 1 million children gain from that, but far more children will see what is due to them far more quickly than ever before.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Is the Secretary of State convinced that child poverty will be relieved by his reform, which will result in absent fathers who do not pay being criminalised? The taxpayer will have to pay twice: to keep absent fathers in prison and for the children. Would it not have been better for the Government to proceed along the excellent lines suggested by the Woolf report and replace criminal with civil remedies in this difficult area?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that the agency will try every possible means to ensure that fathers who will not pay do pay. A variety of sanctions can be brought to bear against a parent who will not pay. For example, if a parent enters into an agreement to look after the children and breaks it, the CSA will immediately attach that person's wages so that it can get that money into payment. Clearly, if all else fails and a parent will not co-operate, criminal sanctions might have to be brought against that person.

The problem is twofold. First, the system is complicated. Many people who want to look after their children are unable to do so because of all the red tape and bureaucracy involved. We are resolving that through the simpler formula. Secondly, a minority of fathers can pay but will not pay. That is why we are being far tougher on them. If necessary, we will take criminal sanctions against them. I would have thought that most people would support that objective. When someone who can perfectly well afford to pay for their children does not do so, that person should be made to pay in whatever way is appropriate.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it must be in the interests of both the paying and receiving parent that the system works efficiently? Is his experience in constituency surgeries the same as mine—namely, that the CSA is woefully inadequate and gets the most basic calculations wrong? People who come to see us give a litany, which is always the same, of telephone calls that are not answered and letters that are not adequate. Does he agree that, in the end, the reforms will stand or fall on whether the CSA provides a service that does justice to both parents?

We know—the right hon. Gentleman is about to remind me—that the system was set up under a Conservative Government, but will he move away from that part of his script and agree that, after two and a half years, something rather better is necessary?

Mr. Darling: I did not think that I would ever see the day when I agreed with almost everything that the hon. Gentleman said. However, he misses the point. He sets out the difficulties that the present system has encountered. That is precisely why we are making changes to the CSA. Fundamentally, it does not work because the calculations needed to work out how much is due to a child are so complicated and convoluted that it takes far too long for the payments to be made. That is why we are introducing a simpler formula that can be easily calculated. The ready reckoners are in the back of the White Paper for anybody who wants to see them. We are making payment easier for those who can pay and want to do so, but we are going to be far tougher on the minority who can pay but will not.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Those ready reckoners do not show the number of people who will lose out under the proposals. Some 350,000 parents will be worse off by an average of £17 a week. How is the right hon. Gentleman going to tackle child poverty in those households that are going to be worse off? The Conservatives are broadly supportive of the Government's attempts to reform the Child Support Agency, but unless the right hon. Gentleman is prepared to address the fundamental flaws in his proposals, we might not be able to support him as readily as we would like.

Mr. Darling: I hope that the Conservatives and others will reflect on the fact that, as a result of the changes that we are making, nearly 1 million children will be better off. Of course some people will be paying more—that is clear from the White Paper proposals—but they will be paying it to their children.

Mr. Pickles: Parents with care will be worse off.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman says that parents will be worse off. It is a parent's obligation to look after their children. The children will be better off. I remind the children—sorry, the Conservatives—*[Interruption.]* It is easy to confuse the two. The Tories have to work out which side they are on. I believe that we should be on the side of the children, not on the side of those who can pay but will not.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I welcome the changes that my right hon. Friend has set out. Simplifying the system will reduce non-payment and ensure that the problem of child poverty is dealt with. However, I should like him to explain two points. First, how will the income of the self-employed be assessed? That has been a particular problem in my constituency. Secondly, when will existing claimants come into the new system, which people in my constituency have welcomed?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend has raised two points. First, we have made it clear that if a self-employed person will not co-operate with the Child Support Agency, we shall take powers to gain access to Inland Revenue records to see what they are saying to the tax authorities. We have all come across constituents who tell us that they are not getting a penny from the absent father, yet they see him driving around town enjoying a good quality of life while the children have to go without the basic necessities of life.

Secondly, my hon. Friend asked when we will switch the existing case load on to the new system. I have made the position clear time and again. I do not want to repeat the mistakes that were made when the Child Support Agency was set up in the early 1990s, when too many cases were put onto an untried system that could not cope. We want to switch the existing cases onto the new system only when we are satisfied that the new CSA can cope. I understand the frustration of those who would like us to proceed faster, but I hope my hon. Friend agrees that if

we repeat the mistakes of the early 1990s, the new system will not succeed. It can succeed if we ensure that it is up and running before we put the new cases on it.

CSA (Reform)

2. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What representations he has received on reform of the CSA; and if he will make a statement. [99060]

7. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): If he will make a statement on his plans to reform the Child Support Agency. [99067]

14. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What plans he has for reforming the Child Support Agency. [99076]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): There is widespread support for radical changes to the current system. We have received a wide range of views on the detail of the proposals since the White Paper was published in July. New legislation on child support, announced in the Queen's Speech, will address the failures of the current system and put children's rights at the heart of the child support system.

Miss McIntosh: Page 7 of the Green Paper gave a written assurance that

"responses will normally be available to the general public unless you specifically ask us to keep your views confidential."

We have now been told that all responses are to be treated as confidential apart from 110 from academic organisations. I gave a written submission, as did 34 Members of Parliament and more than 1,300 members of the public. Have these responses been deemed to be confidential to cover up the overwhelming opposition from the general public to the Green Paper proposals?

Angela Eagle: There was not overwhelming opposition to the basic restructuring of the CSA, although many comments were made on some aspects of it. Some responses have not been made public because they would disclose individual circumstances which it would be unfair to place in the public domain without the say-so of both parents involved.

Helen Jones: What steps will be taken under the new proposals to deal with absent parents who either refuse to co-operate with the CSA or give deliberately misleading information to the organisation, ensuring, in many cases, that parents with care have a long wait before they receive any money while others play the system to their own advantage?

Angela Eagle: One of the basic points about the new system is that in place of more than 100 different facts about the non-resident parent, three or four facts will be all that is needed to calculate maintenance. Non-resident parents can have a good idea of their liabilities if they have a calculator. We will have simpler assessments which will be made much faster. If the non-resident parent refuses to pay, deduction of earnings orders can be introduced. If the parent provides misleading or false information, that will be a criminal offence—for the first time—and subject to penalties of up to £1,000.

Helen Jackson: Has not the bungled way in which the CSA was introduced meant that, far from children being put first, there has been increased acrimony so that shared care arrangements have been jeopardised and sometimes have fallen down as a result of the CSA? Will the Minister assure me that shared care arrangements will be brought into the reckoning in the new reforms, and that a fair way will be found to balance financial obligations and care arrangements in the interests of children?

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend and I could spend all day talking about the many things that have been wrong in the practice of the CSA and in the legislation that set it up. I believe sincerely that the reforms will do much to take away the acrimony. I hope that my hon. Friend welcomes the fact that we wish to encourage the sharing of care by increasing the allowance made in the maintenance assessment for time spent with the child by the non-resident parent. We hope that this will encourage estranged parents to work together, rather than using the agency as a further attempt to pursue their own vendettas against each other, and to put the child and his or her welfare at the centre of their thoughts.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): If the Minister is so keen to reduce acrimony between parents and to encourage shared care and shared financing, and as the Government are so keen to proclaim joined-up government, why are the Government delaying the implementation of part II of the Family Law Act 1996? What discussions is she having with the Lord Chancellor's Department on that matter?

Angela Eagle: The right hon. Lady has been in the House long enough to know that that is a matter for the Lord Chancellor's Department.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Could I invite the Minister to correct the Secretary of State, who seems to have got the wrong end of the stick? Will she confirm that about 350,000 parents with care, whose non-resident parent is in paid work, would have a lower maintenance assessment as a result of the new child support rates, and that the average reduction would be about £17 a week? Just to help her, that was in a written answer that she gave to the House only three weeks ago. Does not that reveal that my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) was correct? How is that fact compatible with the Government's rhetoric on child poverty?

Angela Eagle: I wish that the Opposition would stop trying to play one parent off against the other by talking about gainers and losers. The people who will gain from the proposals will be the children. The hon. Gentleman's analysis of my parliamentary answer would be absolutely accurate if 100 per cent. of people were paying maintenance. However, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, 1.5 million children are on the agency's books, but only 350,000 of those children receive any maintenance at all, and only 100,000 receive

full maintenance payments. The reforms will get maintenance flowing and more children will be better off—everyone will gain.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Given the inept operations of the Child Support Agency, the continuing problems in the Benefits Agency and the difficulties that the Passport Agency has been through, have the Government considered that the problem may lie with the agency model? Perhaps we should consider getting back to a system in which civil servants and public service provisions are to the fore.

Angela Eagle: I am sure that my hon. Friend would not expect me to comment on the Passport Agency. After all this time, only 20 per cent. of women on income support receive their maintenance. The figure was the same the day before the Child Support Agency was set up. We must consider why the agency's existence has made no difference to the flow of maintenance. I am sure that many right hon. and hon. Members will agree that the formula was too rigid and prescriptive and there was simply too much to do, which is why we have gone for a very basic, simple and easily calculated formula.

Means-tested Benefits

3. **Mr. Julian Brazier** (Canterbury): What estimates he has made of the numbers of people receiving means-tested benefits *(a)* in May 1997 and *(b)* in May 2001. [99061]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): We estimate that the number of people in receipt of one or more of the means-tested benefits in May 1997 was about 8 million. We forecast that the number will reduce to about 7.9 million in May 2001, including those receiving the working families tax credit. The reduction reflects the Government's success in enabling people to get off jobseeker's allowance and back into work.

Mr. Brazier: The reply reflects the fact that unemployment is falling at this point in the economic cycle. Does the Minister accept that putting a large number of new people onto a means-tested benefit—the working families tax credit—and putting many of them on a combined tax and benefit withdrawal rate of more than 80 per cent. will in the long run militate against self-help, lead to a loss of self-confidence and encourage dependency?

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman must be aware that our economic policies have reduced unemployment and increased the total number of people in work by 400,000, to the highest level ever. His comments about the working families tax credit are entirely wrong. It will boost the incomes of 1.5 million families by an average of £24 a week. Come the next general election, the Conservative party will find that its opposition to it will cost it hundreds of thousands of votes.

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): My hon. Friend will no doubt have been encouraged to learn that over the first two years of this Parliament the number of income support claimants fell by more than 400,000, or more than 750,000 if one includes children and other dependants. Is not that proof that the Government are not merely talking about defeating poverty but are getting on and doing it?

Mr. Bayley: My hon. Friend makes the point extremely powerfully. The Government have set extremely challenging targets over the long term to reduce poverty. We have made a start and our policies are having the desired effect.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Will the Minister reflect on three facts: that pensioners resent being forced to go through a means test simply to get a decent income; that his decision to increase pensions by 75p next April will force thousands more into the means test; and that his policy of a state second pension and stakeholder pension will not touch pensioner incomes for a decade or more? Is it not true that the Government have no policy to reduce pensioner dependence on means tests for a decade to come?

Mr. Bayley: That is absolute nonsense. The Government have policies in the long term to reform the pension system so that so many elderly people—the proportion is one in five at present—do not have to be dependent on means-tested benefits, and we are taking action now to improve the position of pensioners. Our predecessors, the Conservatives, simply increased the pension each year by the rate of inflation. On top of the 75p inflation increase this year, we have provided a £100 winter fuel bonus for all pensioners—that is almost £2 a week extra for each pensioner household.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Has there been a reduction or increase in the take-up of housing benefit, and how is the review of housing benefit coming on? Are we getting somewhere?

Mr. Bayley: The review of housing benefit is continuing, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will make an announcement in due course.

Child Support Agency

4. **Mr. Howard Flight** (Arundel and South Downs): What plans he has to improve the confidence of the public in the handling of individual cases by the CSA; and if he will make a statement. [99062]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): Our plans to reform the child support system were set out in a White Paper on 1 July. The new system will be effective and easily understood, ensuring that maintenance is paid regularly and reliably. The Child Support Agency is also being reformed to provide a service that is better focused on its customers.

Mr. Flight: May I have the Government's assurance that the computer system will be properly tested for the new system, simple though it is, because many of the problems with the existing system have reflected an inadequate and failing computer system? Secondly, will the approach be changed, because the absence of case officers has, in many of the cases I have dealt with, caused mistakes due to clerical error, with no apparent central

responsibility for any one case? The new system may be simpler, but unless its software is efficient and it is administered well, it runs the risk of experiencing many of the same weaknesses as the present arrangements.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is right on both counts. The present computer system operated by the CSA is not very good. It was purchased by the previous Government and it should have been a lot better. I can assure him that the new system will not be brought in until we are satisfied that the IT systems can cope and also that the culture in the CSA has changed, because we have to offer a radically different approach. In the meantime, the staff, who still have to cope with a complex system, are making changes.

We have made changes to the decision-making process, so that things can be put right as soon as a mistake is discovered and parents do not have to appeal. In addition, we have introduced more face-to-face interviews for people who want them and more discussion over the telephone, which can sometimes resolve problems. However, I have to tell the House that until the new system is introduced and becomes operational, we have to operate under the existing system. While we will do our best to ensure that it is improved week by week and month by month, some of the problems that we are all familiar with will continue until the new system, which I am determined will work far better, is introduced.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): No one doubts the Secretary of State's commitment to making the system work better, and indeed it would be difficult to make it work worse, but is not the hazard involved in the length of time the changeover is taking the fact that many people are in real trouble because they are not receiving assistance from the CSA? I had three cases on Saturday—each one was genuine—and unless some urgent action is taken, many people will not receive assistance. Some people feel that the agency does not investigate when they provide evidence and others are loth to get involved with the CSA because of its apparent incompetence.

Mr. Darling: I understand entirely the point that my hon. Friend makes. She will appreciate that, at the moment, before any calculation can be made, some 100 pieces of information have to be obtained from the non-resident parent. Sometimes that is difficult, and even when the agency gets the information the position can change before the application is processed and the amount due to be paid is calculated. I do not apologise for that; it is simply a matter of fact.

The present system is inherently complex and difficult to operate. As I said to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), we are making changes within the agency to improve performance. It was woeful in the past, but it is improving. Unfortunately, the increase in the case load of some 60 per cent in the past few years is putting additional strains on a system that was already creaking.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) said that she wanted change as quickly as possible, and I understand that. Unfortunately, it will take primary legislation before we can make any of the changes, and that will be included in the legislation that will come before the House shortly. As the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said, the changes are dependent on a new IT system, which we are in the process of procuring. However, I repeat that it will help no one, least of all the 1 million children who will gain under the new arrangements, if we rush our fences again. By doing that, we should end up with exactly the same problem, with which we are all too familiar.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us the exact target time in which Child Support Agency staff should return telephone calls to members of the public? Furthermore, according to exactly what criteria will individuals under the new system be able to appeal against decisions under the flat-rate formula?

Mr. Darling: It is made clear to the staff that they should return calls as quickly as possible. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that performance is sometimes not as good as it should be. However, we have put some £28 million more into the agency this year to ensure that we retain some of our best qualified staff and to improve things.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that earlier this year we introduced a new decision-making and appeals process throughout the social security system, which is now being rolled out across all the agencies. Instead of individuals having to go through a full-scale appeals process, which is what happens at present, under the new arrangements, people on the front line will, for the first time, be able to put matters right when the facts are brought to their attention.

Disability Living Allowance

5. **Mr. David Borrow** (South Ribble): If he will make a statement on the progress being made by his Department in improving the accuracy of testing for eligibility for disability living allowance. [99065]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): We are making progress on work to ensure the correctness and reliability of awards of disability living allowance. We are doing so in consultation with organisations of and for disabled people.

Mr. Borrow: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I recognise that there will always be cases in which the decision on eligibility is debatable. However, a number of constituents have sought my help in the past 12 months because of perverse decisions or recommendations by doctors carrying out medicals for DLA eligibility. My concern is that the Department should monitor doctors' performance in carrying out such medical checks. Will my hon. Friend ensure that the number of cases in which perverse decisions are made is reduced, because the unwarranted removal of DLA eligibility creates a great deal of distress and hardship for constituents everywhere?

Mr. Bayley: My hon. Friend makes an important contribution. Let me reassure him and the House that the Government's approach to DLA and other benefits is to change the delivery system so that the decisions are right in the first place, and continue to be right thereafter.

We have made significant changes to the way in which the medical services operate since they were contracted out to Sema just over a year ago. We monitor the performance of medical board incentives and doctors, doctor by doctor. When performance strays from the norm, follow-up management action is taken with the doctor concerned.

We are also introducing more rigorous training for medical services doctors and more rigorous tests before such doctors are employed. I hope that my hon. Friend is reassured that we recognise the problem that he describes and are taking action to deal with it.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): But is there not a conflict of interest here? Doctors obviously want to remain on the panel, but if they find in favour of applicants too often they might find themselves off the panel.

I share the experience of the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow). In a recent appeal, a young gentleman suffering from multiple sclerosis was refused DLA because he said that he probably could walk 102 yd, or whatever the silly distance was. The whole system and the forms are weighted against people who suffer from an illness that is partly physical and partly not. Will the Minister urgently consider the need to review the initial forms?

Mr. Bayley: I reassure the House that doctors employed by the Benefits Agency have never been remunerated according to the decisions that they make. Such a system has never existed, and will not exist in the future. Doctors must make the best clinical judgment. There is no pressure on them to err in the claimant's favour, or against the claimant's favour. When we review doctors' performance, through the review that I mentioned in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow), management action is triggered as a result of variation from the norm in either direction; discussions about a doctor's clinical practice then take place.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Does not the Minister appreciate the real distress caused to many people with disabilities when they are reassessed despite the manifest difficulties that they have? What proportion of appeals is allowed? Will he give me an absolute assurance that the initial assessment process is not used to reduce the number of benefit recipients to those who are sufficiently articulate or well advised to appeal successfully?

Mr. Bayley: The assessment process was agreed with disabled peoples' organisations, and with those organisations that represent and speak for disabled people. They wanted a self-assessment system. The form used is a long one, but it allows people applying for benefit to put their own views. That is the primary basis on which the award is made.

When this Government took office in 1997, 59 per cent. of appeals were successful. Although the proportion has now fallen to 48 per cent., it is still too high and the Government must go further. We are, however, moving in the right direction, and we are doing so in consultation with bodies that represent disabled people.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Does my hon. Friend agree that the disability benefits system works better when disabled claimants understand it more clearly? Will he join me in paying tribute to the work of local disability information and advice line organisations, which provide advice to disabled people?

The Government have introduced much excellent legislation on behalf of disabled people, and have changed the benefits system for the better. Will my hon. Friend consider working with local organisations to set up or support information seminars? Such seminars, which would have to be held in more than one locality in a region, would help disabled people to understand the system. Would that not save time spent on fruitless appeals and on the other problems described earlier?

Mr. Bayley: I agree that local disability information and advice workers have an extremely important job. In fact, on Friday evening in Birmingham, I spoke at the conference of the Alliance of Disability Advice and Information Providers. My hon. Friend will know that I recently made a couple of presentations in the House to inform hon. Members of what the medical service of the Benefits Agency is doing to improve the quality and consistency of decisions. I shall certainly consider taking those presentations out on a roadshow with voluntary bodies up and down the country.

Means-tested Benefits

6. **Mr. Peter Viggers** (Gosport): What research his Department is currently evaluating into the advantages and disadvantages of means-testing benefits. [99066]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The Department is not currently carrying out any research on the advantages or disadvantages of means-testing.

Mr. Viggers: The Government's pensions Green Paper, published a year ago, had as one its objectives the aim of giving

"greater rewards to those who have made provision for their own retirement."

It acknowledged the resentment felt by those who, having saved for their retirement, are therefore disqualified from receiving benefits. Are not the Government, with their guaranteed minimum pension for the improvident, doing the opposite of the priority that they set out? Moreover, there has not been the promised review of capital disregards for those with modest savings. Have not the Government, once again, said one thing and done another?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): Disgraceful.

Mr. Rooker: I understand the reasons behind the question but it is disgraceful, as my hon. Friend says, to describe as improvident people in receipt of the minimum income guarantee. Such people, because of the nature of their employment, may never have had the opportunity to contribute to an occupational works pension or superannuation scheme.

However, I take the point that the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) makes about capital limits, which have been fixed for many years. We are committed to

reviewing those limits and we will do so, because we do not wish to send a signal that thrift does not pay: we must send a signal that it pays to save. The fact that capital limits were frozen year after year was a disgrace, but we shall correct that by reviewing them during this Parliament.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I am sure that my hon. Friend recognises the complexity and duplication in having to produce information for many means-tested benefits. What progress are the Government making on one-stop benefits, which will help people and save cost?

Mr. Rooker: We are piloting the one-stop benefit around the country. Eight new pilots start today.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Does the Minister recall the Chancellor's statement to the Labour conference before the election, in which he said:

"I want the next Labour government to achieve what in 50 years of the welfare state has never been achieved, the end of the means-test for our elderly people"?

Does the Minister understand that if the basic state pension is increased in line with prices and the minimum income guarantee is increased in line with earnings, we will end up with more means testing, not less? Why will he not admit that that is the clear, deliberate, conscious policy of this Government and that it deters people from saving?

Mr. Rooker: I am not clear what solution the hon. Gentleman advances—he would probably argue that that is not his job. Too many pensioners are on the means test, and that has been the case for many, many years. Without the proposals in the Green Paper mentioned by the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers), 3.5 million pensioners—one in three—would be on the means test in 2050. The proposals in the Green Paper on the stakeholder pension and on the second state pension will reduce that figure considerably. We do not intend to tip pensioners into the means test, as the Opposition allege.

Mr. Willetts: There is no point in talking about such long-distant visions if, year on year, the Government spread means testing. Does the Minister accept the calculation of the Institute for Fiscal Studies that people will need a fund of £130,000 to avoid being trapped on the Government's minimum income guarantee? If he does not, will he offer an alternative calculation? People planning for their retirement must know how much to save to keep themselves above the Government's means tests?

Mr. Rooker: Yes, indeed. The No. 1 priority of people should be to plan for their retirement throughout. They were never told that by the previous Government; they were left high and dry and too many have ended up on the means test. As we have made clear, there must be a policy for today's pensioners and for tomorrow's—but not the same policy. There are pensioners who have to be helped today, which is why the minimum income guarantee was introduced. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, helping those pensioners by an across-the-board increase would not put an extra penny in their pockets. We are determined to target resources on today's poorer pensioners while making adequate plans and preparations in law to ensure that tomorrow's pensioners retire on a decent income above the means test.

Volunteering

8. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What assessment he has made of the obstacles raised by social security rules to volunteering. [99068]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We are keen to encourage voluntary work. We recognise that it can play a significant role in preparing people to enter work, especially those who may have been out of the labour market for some time. People who are in receipt of social security benefits may do unlimited amounts of voluntary work without it affecting their benefit, as long as other eligibility conditions continue to be met.

Mr. Kidney: On Saturday, I co-hosted a conference in Stafford for voluntary organisations about recruiting and retaining volunteers imaginatively entitled "Desperately Seeking Volunteers". Those present were complimentary about the Government's attitude to allowing people to undertake voluntary work, but they identified two residual areas where obstacles remain. The first was the obstructive attitude of a small number of staff at the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service who tried to get in the way of their volunteering. The second was the medical eligibility test for benefits such as incapacity benefit and disability living allowance, where, if people put their heads above the parapet for voluntary work, they run the risk of being ruled as fit for paid work. Does my hon. Friend agree that, with a little central direction from her, both those minor obstacles could be smoothed away?

Angela Eagle: If there are pockets of obstruction, perhaps my hon. Friend will let me know where they are and I will see what I can do to put an end to them. When we abolished the 16-hour rule for incapacity benefit, we made it quite clear that we encourage people who are currently on benefits to volunteer. There is no limit to the number of hours for which they may volunteer. If my hon. Friend can give me further details on that matter, I shall deal with it.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): Does acting as a local councillor qualify as voluntary work? If so, should a local councillor be able to collect disability benefits?

Angela Eagle: I understand that there is a disability benefit disregard for those who serve on councils. If the hon. Gentleman has a particular point of detail, perhaps he will write to me and I shall certainly deal with it.

Benefits Expenditure

10. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): If he will make a statement on his Department's forecasts for expenditure on social security payments. [99070]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): Social security spending is growing at well under half its rate during the previous

Parliament, and is now taking a declining share of national income—an achievement that the Conservative Government never managed.

Mr. Paterson: That is exactly the answer that I received during the statement about two weeks ago. When the Prime Minister spoke at Church house on 7 May 1997, he said that one of his main priorities would be to reduce social security spending. In that case, why does table B12 of the Government's figures in the pre-Budget report show that social security benefits will increase from £93.3 billion to a massive £103.6 billion?

Mr. Darling: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is now getting the message that social security spending is growing at well under half the rate that it did under the previous Government. Of course, it is growing slightly, but it is growing at half the rate that it did under the previous Government. He may be interested to learn that so far in this Parliament, as a result of getting more people into work, we have saved more than £7 billion. That is a direct result of the Labour Government's economic policies and of our policy of getting people back into work.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Will my right hon. Friend draw the Opposition's attention to the simple fact that, if more and more of us live for longer in retirement, the social security bill—for example, that for pensions—will rise? Is not the important commitment made by the Government that, although the total social security bill will rise, the proportion met by taxpayers—if we consider public and private provision—will fall?

Mr. Darling: My right hon. Friend is right. The Government's strategy, as set out in the Green Paper published a year ago, is to ensure that all those who can make provision for themselves should do so. The first leg of improvements needed to implement that is part of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999; the second is in legislation that will be put to the House shortly.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the second most important reason for the reduction in social security plans between March and November is the £1.7 billion fall in disability benefit expenditure? Will he explain why, over the past seven months, he has miraculously reduced his forecast for disability benefit spending by £1.7 billion? Does that have anything to do with the means-testing of benefits that was put through the House only the other day?

Mr. Darling: When the hon. Gentleman thinks about the matter—he has a reputation for thinking about things—he will realise that the changes in the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act do not come into effect until 2001. There are two reasons for the reduction in expenditure, the first of which results from changes introduced by the Conservative Government in 1995. Secondly, we are tightening all the gateways to the social security system to ensure that those who are not entitled to benefit do not receive it. If they are entitled to benefit, we ensure that we give more help than ever before. Those changes will be welcomed by most reasonable people.

Pensions

11. **Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East): If he will make a statement on his policy on the link between pensions and increases in pay. [99071]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): Our policy, which was set out in the manifesto, is that the basic state pension should be uprated at least in line with prices. The poorest current pensioners will, of course, benefit from the recently announced increase of 4.6 per cent. to the minimum income guarantee. In the longer term, pensioners will benefit from the state second pension, legislation for which we shall shortly introduce. I can also announce that a consultation document on the contracting-out aspects of the state second pension will be published later today. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Crausby: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. The Conservatives broke the link between pensions and pay. I accept that the Government cannot cure overnight the problems associated with 18 years of the previous Government, but does he agree that pensions received by the elderly are not charitable donations from the Government, but are earned as a result of the national insurance contributions that they paid throughout their life, which increased as their wages increased? Is it not morally right that pensions should increase as wages increase?

Mr. Rooker: My hon. Friend is quite right about national insurance contributions, but let us not beat about the bush. The basic state pension has never provided an adequate income on which to live, whether people have been fully paid up or not. I remind him that in the first three years of this Parliament pensioners as a group have received, via the winter fuel discount, which is not means-tested, and the minimum income guarantee, which is means-tested, £800 million more than they would have received if the basic state pension had been increased in line with earnings.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): Does the Minister agree that his policies will increase the number of pensioners receiving means-tested benefits?

Mr. Rooker: No, I do not accept that.

Minimum Income Guarantee

13. **Mr. Vernon Coaker** (Gedling): What estimate he has made of the number of pensioners benefiting from the minimum income guarantee. [99074]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): In May 1999, 1.4 million pensioners were benefiting from the minimum income guarantee.

Mr. Coaker: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. That figure means that a huge number of pensioners throughout the country, including in my constituency of Gedling in Nottingham, have benefited from the Government's policy. However, as he is aware, there is a

problem with take-up. Will he investigate whether we can introduce imaginative measures to get pensioners who are not claiming the minimum income guarantee to claim it?

Mr. Rooker: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. There is a problem with take-up—which, before anyone says anything, is inevitable with a means-tested benefit. However, there are also problems with take-up of attendance allowance, which is not means-tested. Too many pensioners are missing out. We estimate that take-up is about 40. per cent., so there are opportunities to increase take-up of that allowance. Millions of pensioners receive council tax benefit and housing benefit, as do millions of other people, and no stigma is attached to those benefits. We shall run a Government-sponsored take-up campaign for the minimum income guarantee early next year.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Has the Minister taken any notice of the results of the focus groups that insurance companies have been running on the minimum pension guarantee, and is he not concerned that the message has obviously got across to generations of people whose retirement is some time away that they will gain no advantage from investing and saving for their future if their income is low?

Mr. Rooker: I hate to admit this, but the answer is yes. I have taken account of the focus groups because, along with some of my hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), I recently attended one of those groups, which was illuminating. The reaction was exactly the same as that of some of my constituents.

Nevertheless, the central issue that emerged was the need to save and prepare for a pension many years in advance, and the thought that, if it is left too late, it becomes more expensive. That has got across to people, as has the point that I made earlier—that anyone who relies solely on the basic state retirement pension and makes no other provision will, as has always been the case, retire in abject poverty.

Household Income

15. **Miss Julie Kirkbride** (Bromsgrove): If he will make a statement on the gap between the rich and the poor, as measured by household income. [99077]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The gap between rich and poor widened dramatically in the 1980s. We are, as a Government, serious about creating a fairer society—an aim that I hope the hon. Lady shares. We want all our citizens to have the opportunities to maximise their potential and we want to create a society in which all can share in the growing prosperity of the nation. The facts on poverty and social exclusion in this country are absolutely shocking; we intend to address them.

Miss Kirkbride: As usual, the hon. Gentleman did not answer the question. Before the election, the Labour party made great play of the fact that the gap between the rich and the poor was widening. That is still true under this Labour Government and it must increasingly be true while state benefits—some people will always rely on state benefits—increase according to inflation and the market increases salaries by a greater percentage. Is it not one of the great Labour lies that his Government will do anything to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor?

Mr. Rooker: I regret that the hon. Lady takes that approach. It is a fact that we have taken hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty, have introduced the working families tax credit so that no one else will ever be better off on benefit than in work—that must make a substantial difference—and are the first Government to produce a poverty audit of this country. In effect, that was an audit of the legacy of the previous Government, for which we are prepared to be accountable year in, year out. Between 1979 and 1995-96, the share of income received by the bottom 20 per cent. of the population went down from 9.8 per cent. to 6.7 per cent. while the share of the top 20 per cent. went up from 35 per cent. to 41 per cent. I do not know how the hon. Lady had the brass neck to ask her question.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Would it not be appropriate for every Tory Member in the Chamber to apologise for the appalling poverty into which so many people—my constituents and others—were forced as a result of Tory policies during their 18 years in government? Does my hon. Friend expect any such apology to be made by any Tory Member from the Front or Back Benches?

Mr. Rooker: I expect it, but I suspect that it will not happen.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Minister depart for a moment from ploughing through his set text to answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride)? She referred to the increasing gap between the rich and the poor under this Government. Is it not a fact that the latest survey of households on below average income shows that the gap between rich and poor is increasing under this Government? Will he nominate—or will he even take a flier at guessing—which year the Government will succeed in closing that gap rather making it wider?

Mr. Rooker: I answered the question that I was asked. I was asked to make a statement on the gap, and, as I said, it is too wide. Although I thought that the hon. Gentleman was bright enough to do so, he cannot take on board the fact that, as everyone knows, for the first two years of this Administration we kept to the spending limits of the previous Government—

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): It was the Government's choice.

Mr. Rooker: Yes, it was our choice. We kept to those spending limits and the policies of the previous Government will permeate for some time to come. There is no doubt about that. Everything—*[Interruption.]* I am telling the truth. Everything cannot be solved in 32 months.

Customer Service

16. **Mr. Hilary Benn** (Leeds, Central): If he will make a statement on steps his Department is taking to improve customer service in the social security system. [99078]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): The Department is considering how to ease the transition from benefits to work as part of customer services improvements and to improve the administration of benefits to remove barriers to work. Among other things, we are looking at linking rules and run-ons, such as the two-week run-on for lone parents who are on income support and jobseeker's allowance that was recently put into effect and the 12-month linking rule for those on the new deal for disabled people.

Mr. Benn: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. Does she agree that as well as addressing the poverty trap we need to continue to address the process trap, by which I mean the problems that claimants can experience in moving off benefit and into work and back again, which act as an obstacle to seeking a job?

Angela Eagle: I cannot agree more with my hon. Friend's comments, and I assure him that we are focusing on the path leading from benefits back into work and on what happens when people take part-time or temporary jobs. That is why the new ONE pilots include a better-off calculation to reassure people about whether they will be better off in work. We are considering redesigning the system to ensure that if a job does not work out, people can get back on to benefits with the minimum hassle.

Crime Reduction Strategy

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the Government's crime reduction strategy, which I have published today. Copies of the strategy document and of the Home Office model of recorded crime are available in the Vote Office.

First, however, I am sure that I speak for the whole House in expressing my shock and outrage at the attack that took place yesterday at St. Andrew's church, Thornton Heath in the London borough of Croydon, in the constituency of the Under–Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks). It is hard to think of anything more terrible than to have the serenity of a church service destroyed by such an attack. I should like to express our deepest sympathy for those who were injured, their families and friends and the entire congregation who witnessed that awful event. I should like also to express my admiration for the courage of those who intervened to save the largely elderly parishioners from even worse injury.

Over the century, recorded crime has risen by an annual average of around 5 per cent. Recorded crime in fact doubled in the 1980s and early 1990s. Thanks to the tremendous work of the police and local authorities, it has fallen steadily since then—by 19 per cent. over the past five years and by 9 per cent. between 1997 and 1999. For the first time, last year's British crime survey showed that the overall level of crime, including incidents not reported to the police, was on the way down, as was fear of crime.

Over the past two and a half years, we have sought to lay the foundations for the most co-ordinated attack on crime and its causes: 375 local crime and disorder reduction partnerships are now up and running; over the next three years, £400 million will be put into evidence-led crime reduction programmes, including the biggest ever investment in closed circuit television; £60 million is being invested in schemes to cut burglary, and there is help to protect the most vulnerable pensioners.

A new crime fighting fund has been established with new money to recruit 5,000 more officers over and above those already planned. We have made available £34 million for extending the DNA database and are putting an extra £50 million towards transforming police communications. All that is on top of the extra £1.25 billion provided to the police over this year and the next two years.

We are insisting on tough, consistent prison sentences for serious criminals, far more rigorous enforcement of community sentences and zero tolerance of anti-social behaviour. Alongside that we want quicker, more effective punishment for persistent young offenders, with a thorough modernisation of the whole system for dealing with young criminals.

There is, however, more to do. Despite recent falls, crime is still way above its level of the late 1970s, and the level of property crime is significantly higher than in most comparable countries.

Over the past five years, as figures published this morning show, all forces have achieved reductions in crime, but some have been much more successful than others: for example, Northumbria, Kent, Durham, Surrey and Gloucestershire have all achieved reductions in recorded crime of more than 30 per cent. Those statistics reveal that similar police forces and local authorities, with similar problems and similar resources, achieve widely differing performances in crime reduction. Reducing the crime rate of the 21 forces with the highest rates to that of the average would cut recorded crime by 0.5 million. However, we want to aim higher: our emphasis is on encouraging the police, local authorities and others to raise their performance. I have set out how we can raise performance and reduce crime across the country in the strategy document.

The best value regime set up under the Local Government Act 1999 establishes the process for delivering a step change in the quality of all local services, including crime reduction. From April 2000, we should like every police authority and local crime reduction partnership to set five-year targets for reduction in the three sets of offences of greatest concern to the public: vehicle crime, domestic burglary and street robberies. For police authorities, the aim should be, over that five-year period, to raise the level of their performance to that of the top 25 per cent. of comparable authorities. We shall discuss the comparators and the process in more detail with chief constables and police authorities. Of course, we shall take into account the particular circumstances of individual forces.

From January next year, we shall publish crime statistics not only for entire police force areas, but for individual police divisions, or basic command units. By April 2001, we should have data available to ensure top quartile targets at the level of the local partnerships. Together, those measures will enable people to see how their local police and partnerships are doing, compared with performance in equivalent areas.

I recognise that, to raise the performance of the local partnerships, strong leadership and support are needed at national and regional level. At national level, we are to establish a new national crime reduction task force to be chaired by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), with the chief constable of Kent, Mr. David Phillips, as vice-chairman. We are discussing with the Local Government Association the appointment of a second vice-chairman to represent local authorities. At regional level, we shall appoint new crime reduction directors, based in the Government offices for the regions. The regional directors will work with the police, local government and other agencies to support crime reduction work and help to sustain improvements in performance.

From January, Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary will lead a new inspection on crime reduction with the Home Office and the Audit Commission to examine how forces, at basic command unit level—that is, district level—and partnerships are dealing with local crime and disorder problems. I should also tell the House that, in response to calls from the police service for a simplification of Government priorities, the number of ministerial priorities for the year 2000-2001 has been reduced to two: reducing crime and disorder and increasing confidence among minority ethnic communities.

On the Home Office model of recorded crime, from the early 1990s, economists in the Home Office have sought to isolate those factors external to the criminal justice

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system—such as levels of economic activity and employment, the stock of goods, and the number of young men—which might historically have been related to movements in recorded crime. The models suggest that there is a strong historic association between changes in the level of recorded property crime and some of the key economic and demographic factors.

The economists have made a projection of what effect they believe that association would have on the level of recorded property crime, assuming no positive intervention by the police, local authorities or Government. Those projections are not forecasts of what the Government believe will or should happen. Criminal behaviour is wrong and the model provides no excuse for it. Moreover, there is nothing inevitable about the trend in the model. The models for the four-year period 1997 to 2001 suggest that, if no positive programmes had been or were to be put in place, by 2001, theft would be 40 per cent. higher and burglary 25 per cent. higher than in 1997. However, half way through this 1997–2001 period there is good evidence that we are bucking the projected trend. Burglary in the first two years of this period is down and not up; and vehicle crime is down, not up. The research therefore underlines the relative success achieved so far, but also the scale of the challenge that we face. One key of many to meeting that challenge is the better targeting of crimes and of criminals.

We therefore have a strong focus in our strategy on vehicle crime and burglary, which together account for 40 per cent. of all recorded crime. Tomorrow I will be announcing the successful projects in the first round of the £150 million CCTV programme, significantly aimed at reducing vehicle crime. From Wednesday, any offender convicted of three separate domestic burglary offences from that date will face a minimum prison sentence of at least three years. Also on Wednesday, curfew orders enforced by electronic tagging will become available to all courts across the country.

Later this week, we will be announcing plans for the distribution of the £20 million for drug arrest referral to establish such schemes in every police custody suite by April 2001, to get offenders off drugs and into treatment. The crime and public protection Bill will facilitate the use of drug testing at arrest and charge, and for offenders on community punishments to deter further drug use and offending. The Bill will also extend the possibilities for electronic tagging and provide for reform of the probation service.

Also published today are figures which show that on youth crime we are well on our way to meeting our key pledge to halve the time that it takes to deal with persistent young offenders from arrest to sentence by March 2002. In 1997, the average time was 142 days—more than 20 weeks. In 1998 it was 125 days. This fell to 110 days across the first half of 1999. Individual areas are showing how much can be achieved through good partnership between agencies. Two areas, north Wales and Warwickshire, have been particularly successful, managing already to achieve an average of fewer than 71 days.

By modernising and speeding up the court process with the national roll-out of the Narey changes we are meeting our pledge to relieve the police of unnecessary bureaucratic burdens to get more officers back on the beat and on to operational duties. Above all, we are transforming the way in which victims are treated, with the measures in the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999, and a 50 per cent. increase in funding for victim support to provide witness services in every magistrates court.

The Government are determined to put the public's protection first. Ours is an ambitious programme which will, if achieved, make major inroads into reducing crime. The fight against crime is an integral part of our commitment to make Britain a better place in which to live. If we can cut crime, we can add value to every aspect of our life. I commend the strategy to the House.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): First, I associate the Opposition with the Home Secretary's comments about the appalling crime which took place at St. Andrew's church in Croydon yesterday. I am sure that the Metropolitan police will be conducting a full investigation and that lessons can be learned when their report is made known. For today, however, I think that the right response is just to express sympathy for the victims and their families and pride in the courageous actions of those who managed to disarm the alleged criminal.

I thank the Home Secretary for his statement and also for his courtesy in giving me early sight of the background documents to his announcement. I thank him also for giving me the opportunity some little while in advance to see a copy of the statement.

We can welcome and endorse several aspects of the statement. Indeed, one or two items in the right hon. Gentleman's list of measures seem more than a little familiar from the period before May 1997.

First, may I ask about the extension of electronic tagging as a means of enforcing curfew orders? The Opposition support that in principle, but we have some questions. We would welcome the use of electronic tagging as part of a community penalty. Does the Home Secretary accept that in many cases, it would make sense to link a tagging order to a compensation order, so that a criminal is deprived of his liberty during his leisure time, but during his working hours he is earning money from which to pay compensation to the victims who have suffered from his actions?

Will the Home Secretary take this opportunity to deny media reports last week that the Government are planning to use tagging to allow for the early release of serious, violent and sexual offenders? Does he accept that such a step would be an abuse of the tagging system, and that such criminals ought not to be released early?

Secondly, I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement of the expansion of the DNA database. That follows his announcement of that during his Labour party conference speech, the announcement during the Prime Minister's Labour party conference speech, and the exclusive briefing to the *Daily Mirror*. Can the Home Secretary confirm what the Government intend should happen to samples taken from people who are subsequently acquitted of charges brought against them? Are we right to understand that, as with fingerprints, those DNA samples should be destroyed after an appropriate period?

Can the right hon. Gentleman comment on the £34 million that he mentioned in his statement? Is that entirely new money, is it funded from the reserve, or is it

coming from elsewhere in the Home Office's budget? Can he assure us that it will not cause cuts to other services in his Department?

Finally, on the measures that we welcome, I very much applaud the Government's decision to implement the three-strikes provision in the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 in respect of recidivist burglars. Presumably, that will lead to a revision of the Home Office forecast of the future prison population.

Can the Home Secretary say by how much he expects the prison population to expand, following the introduction of that measure, and over what period? Does he agree that no Government could implement the legislation

"unless there were an assurance of the resources to house and finance the increased prison population"?—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 18 March 1997; Vol. 579, c. 885.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the noble Lord McIntosh of Haringey when the Bill was going through Parliament. How does the Home Secretary reconcile that need with the reported letter from the then Chief Secretary, which made it clear that the Treasury was not prepared to countenance a further reserve claim to accommodate the pressures on the Prison Service?

How many extra prison places will be required? What are the implications for the prison building programme—for example, does it mean that the Government will be contracting for more private sector prisons over the next few years? How much will that prison accommodation cost, and where will the Home Secretary get the money?

The Home Secretary made much in his statement, and makes even more in the strategy document published today, about the various measures that the Government have introduced. May I urge on him the need to keep those measures under constant review? Will he confirm, for example, that of the drug treatment and testing orders so far passed by the courts, more than half have been breached, and about one third have been revoked because of the seriousness of the breach? Can he say whether the number of anti-social behaviour orders has now risen above the grand total of seven? Can he confirm that there are still no child curfew orders in operation?

There have been reports recently that the Home Secretary plans, just one year on, to introduce amendments to his flagship Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Can he confirm that? Does he agree that there is a need for independent audit and scrutiny, not just of the police service, but of the Government's measures on crime and crime reduction?

We are happy with the idea that there should be greater public access to information about police performance, but the Home Secretary must understand that, after the smoke and mirrors trick over the figure of 5,000 extra police officers that he claimed at his party conference, there will be an element of suspicion that the publication of league tables amounts to an effort by a Home Secretary who knows that crime is once more rising to deflect blame for that away from himself and on to the police service. We know that the 5,000 promised additional officers have proved to be a mirage. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the vice-chairman of the Police Federation said

"he hasn't got a cat in hell's chance of recruiting 20,000 officers over the next three years",

and that the chairman of the Police Federation claimed that his service was being "short changed"?

The Home Secretary set up a convenient Aunt Sally in the form of an economic model, which, to no one's surprise, predicts a rise in crime. I suspect that the predicted rise is likely to be even higher than the actual increase over which the Government will preside. People want a fall in crime and reduced fear of crime, not simply an increase that falls slightly below that predicted by a team of economists in the Home Office.

After a five-year fall in recorded crime, it is increasing; police numbers are down by more than 1,000 and are due to decrease further in the next 12 months; police budgets are stretched, and efficiency savings are used to plug the deficit rather than to improve front-line services. Will the Home Secretary accept that his success and that of the Government should be measured not only by targets, aspirations or good intentions, but on whether their policies lead to the fall in crime that the public want? The Government's record contains little to suggest that they are capable of achieving the success that the country needs.

Mr. Straw: I thank the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) for his remarks about the terrible events in the church yesterday. As he said, questions will need to be asked and answered about that eventually, but I know that the House accepts that the day after the event, and while the police investigation continues, is not the right time for that.

I am glad that the hon. Gentleman welcomes many of the announcements that I made. I am happy to put on record—the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) will wish to know that it is already on record in a Home Office press notice—that the genesis of the provisions for burglars who are convicted on three separate occasions is the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997, which was passed under the previous Administration.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the effect of the provisions on the prison population and whether the prison projections took that into account. The effect has already been fully taken into account because, although we inherited the policy from the previous Government, I was also committed to it. I have not got the projections in my head but I am happy to send them to the hon. Gentleman. He knows that the prison population has risen by approximately 5,000 in the past two years and that we are making arrangements to deal with a further increase.

I understand those people, mainly outside the House, who sometimes suggest that we should set an arbitrary limit on the number of prison places, but I believe that we should provide as many prison places as the courts require to deal with criminals who need to be imprisoned. We shall have a chance to reduce the prison population significantly only when we can get crime down to 1970s levels.

The hon. Gentleman asked about DNA. I am pleased to tell the House that the Prime Minister gave a DNA sample today and that it did not match any samples on the DNA suspects database. The £34 million is new money, over and above that announced in the comprehensive spending review.

The hon. Gentleman asked about electronic tagging—I am glad that he now appears to support it. That may be because he has read the unanimous report of the Home Affairs Select Committee, which supported its use not

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only as a court punishment, but for the early release of appropriate prisoners. We have no plans or intention whatever to provide for electronic tagging to facilitate the early release of serious or sexual offenders. Let me make that clear, with a full stop—none whatever.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the drug treatment and testing order. Recently, we published a research study of the pilots and, from recollection, I think that the figures he gave are correct. That shows the importance of rigorous enforcement of community punishments, which has not occurred in respect of traditional punishments meted out by the courts and enforced—or not enforced, often—by the probation service. I am sorry that a third of those orders are being revoked, but they are being revoked quickly and on clear scientific evidence. If there were similar rigorous enforcement of other community punishments, such as probation or community work service orders, we would not have such levels of repeat offending on them. We are determined to make sure that the order is used by the courts—not in respect of offenders who would otherwise go to prison, but for those who would otherwise be given a community punishment—to ensure either that they get off drugs and off crime or, if they do not, that they go to prison.

The hon. Gentleman asked about child curfew orders. There have been none, as he knows, and we are consulting local authorities and the police about whether the age limit should be raised from 10 to 16. I am at a loss to understand where he is coming from on anti-social behaviour orders. They were asked for by the police and local authorities and they have been welcomed by them. Where they have been used—for example, in Lancashire and in Derbyshire—they have turned out to be an important tool in cracking down on anti-social behaviour. It is often the case that criminal justice agencies, being conservative with a small "c", take some time to get used to and to implement new and fresh measures, but I would have thought that Conservative Members would be doing themselves a favour if, instead of criticising the measure, they said that, wherever we are faced with evidence of serious anti-social behaviour, the orders should be used. That is what Labour Members are saying. Conservative Members will find themselves on the wrong side of the argument if they say that such orders should not be used.

I have two more points to make. First, the hon. Gentleman asked about an independent audit of our measures. I am happy for there to be such an audit and those matters should be kept under continuous review. One way in which that can happen is through the Home Affairs Committee continuously monitoring what we are doing and I would welcome that. He talked about what he described as the mirage of 5,000 additional officers. The money that we are putting in to secure 5,000 officers over and above the 15,000 who are predicted to be recruited in any event by the police service is wholly new money. We are also providing for that money to be ring-fenced so that it is used for that purpose, and that alone.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that when the previous Administration were in office, his boss, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), said that she had

"already reminded hon. Members of the commitment made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister"—

the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)—

"to provide funding for an additional 5,000 police officers over three years."—[*Official Report*, 29 January 1997; Vol. 289, c. 457.]

The only thing was that they did not provide sufficient funding and did not ensure that the money was ring-fenced. Instead of that pledge being met by even a 1,000 or 2,000 increase in the total number of police officers, the number fell by 1,500 over those five years.

Lastly, what will be our measure of success? We want the crime reduction partnership to succeed, but on one measure I am confident beyond peradventure that we shall succeed: under our Administration, crime will not double, as it did under the Conservatives.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: I would remind the House that that opening exchange has taken almost 30 minutes. I do not want long, rambling statements from hon. Members, but pertinent questions to the Secretary of State and brisk exchanges. I am sure that he will oblige me with brisk answers.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement.

On behalf of the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks) and myself, I should like to offer our deepest condolences to the victims and their families who suffered in the brutal attack at St. Andrew's church, Thornton Heath yesterday. We also pay tribute to the bravery of PC Tracey, who was involved in preventing further bloodshed and probable death. I ask that the House extends its sympathy to the community, which is in a state of shock and horror. Will my right hon. Friend take a personal interest in the investigation of that horrific event?

Mr. Straw: The House will wish to be associated with the remarks of my hon. Friend. I am grateful that he also places on record the concern felt by the Under-Secretary, in whose constituency this incident took place. As the House understands—although the public outside sometimes does not—my hon. Friend is a Minister and a member of the Front Bench, so is not able to take part in these exchanges. I fully associate myself with what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) said, and I am taking a personal interest in the investigation of that appalling crime, as is the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I also associate myself with what has been said about the dreadful attack in Croydon yesterday.

I welcome the Home Secretary's proposals, virtually all of which, so far as I can see, build on the measures that I put in place between 1993 and 1997. Will he confirm—because I have never heard it from his lips—that recorded crime fell from just over 5.5 million in 1993 to just over 4.5 million in 1997, which was a reduction of about 17 per cent. and the biggest fall ever recorded? In view of some of the reports in this morning's newspapers that the Government intend to create a national DNA database, will he also confirm that the national DNA database—the first in the world—is in existence, having been established by the previous Government, and has been making a

significant contribution to crime reduction for a number of years? Finally, will he tell us whether the Prime Minister's DNA sample will be preserved?

Mr. Straw: I welcome the right hon. and learned Gentleman's remarks. I think that he has undergone a Pauline conversion to consensus politics. I say that with generosity, and I hope that he takes it in that spirit. He is right, and it is ridiculous to argue about the figures, which are a matter of historic record. He will also accept that the fall that took place between 1993 and 1997—and a fall it was—

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Oh!

Mr. Straw: Of course it was. I am happy to concede that, if Conservative Members will also concede that, in the previous 14 years, crime had risen relentlessly to the stage at which we had the worst record compared with almost any other major industrialised country.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman also asked about the DNA database. I am sorry that I omitted to reply to the point made by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington). I understand that the Prime Minister's DNA sample will be destroyed, because it disclosed nothing suspicious. The same regime applies to any DNA sample as applies to fingerprints.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the range of measures announced. It is not just the courts that are reluctant to make use of the powers in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. I have evidence from my constituency that some police officers—although not all—and many housing officers do not know about the powers available to them to obtain anti-social behaviour orders or are not talking to each other. Will my right hon. Friend and his team constantly remind local government in particular of the availability of those powers?

All that people in my constituency want is a return of the safety and security that has been stolen from them over the years. They will judge the Government's success and that of the police—I welcome the publication of performance figures—by the way in which measures are taken in partnership to reduce crime and the fear of crime in their streets and in and around their homes.

Mr. Straw: I entirely understand my hon. Friend's frustration. I have written to every chief executive and every chief constable in the country, urging them to make use of the orders—orders which did not fall out of the sky, but were sought by them, and on every detail of which they were consulted. To ensure that there are no bureaucratic blocks in the use of the orders, in some areas but by no means in all—many areas now intend to use them—I have asked my noble Friend Lord Warner of Brockley, who chairs the Youth Justice Board of England and Wales, to spearhead action in the Home Office and with local authorities and the police to ensure that individual officers at local level, and individual housing officers, understand that the powers are available, and understand the value to them and, above all, to local communities of using those powers.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I associate both my Liberal Democrat colleagues and those of us who represent south London constituencies with the expressions of sympathy and thanks to those who assisted at St. Andrew's church in Thornton Heath yesterday.

All right-minded citizens are in favour of crime reduction, and a crime reduction strategy. Does the Home Secretary accept that people also believe that crime reduction is directly linked to the number of police who are there to achieve both a reduction in crime, and a reduction in the fear of crime?

This morning, the Home Secretary issued a table showing figures for the police forces in England and Wales. He divided them into the 21 with the highest crime reduction rates, and the 22 with the lowest. Will he comment on the fact that his own table shows that only eight of the 21 forces with the highest reduction rates have experienced a fall in police numbers since his party took office, and that, on average, there has been a rise in numbers in those forces? Of the 22 forces with the lowest rates, 17 have experienced a fall in numbers; the average number in each force has fallen by 55, and the total has fallen by 1,200. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that a reduction in crime and the fear of crime depends on the number of police officers available to fight crime? Will he give a pledge that all those forces will have the increase to which he aspired for the country as a whole?

Let me ask one more question. The Home Office budget for crime reduction proposals is about 3 per cent. Only about 3 per cent. of crimes ever result in people being arrested or cautioned. Will the Home Secretary consider again a change in the balance, so that a much larger part of Government resources, effort and interest can be devoted to crime prevention, and we can reduce the amount of crime by preventing it from happening in the first place?

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): He has lost the plot completely.

Mr. Straw: That is probably accurate.

I believe that good police forces can always make use of additional police officers. That is one of the reasons why we have established a crime fighting fund to increase the number of officers. If, however, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), rather than picking out the odd two-year period, compared the changes in crime levels in police force areas with the changes in police numbers over five years, he would see that there is the weakest correlation. I am happy to send him the regressions.

As it happens, in the Metropolitan police area the number of police officers has fallen by 2,000. To be fair, it fell by 2,000 under the last Administration. At the same time, the force has made significant inroads in dealing with the crimes that worry the public the most. It is crucial for us not just to put additional resources into the police service, but to ensure that they are used effectively, and that the forces that are at the bottom or the middle of the tables aspire to the performance of the best of those that are comparable.

As for the hon. Gentleman's point about crime prevention, I simply do not know where he gets his figures. We have put £400 million into crime prevention, more than any previous Administration have provided.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): We know from DNA and CCTV that science and technology can make

[Dr. Tony Wright]

an important contribution to crime reduction. May I make a point about vehicle crime, which my right hon. Friend mentioned? Car advertisements all tell us that cars are pretty, that they are cool and that they are fast, but never that they are secure. Why are we not making vehicle manufacturers produce secure cars? Would that not make a huge contribution to crime reduction?

Mr. Straw: It is true that cars are advertised for their speed and for other attributes, but I place on record the fact that, over the past 10 years, vehicle manufacturers have gone through a step change and taken security seriously. They understand that it is an important selling point for them, as it is for insurers. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the vehicle crime reduction task force is chaired by a leading executive of the Ford Motor Company. All the big manufacturers recognise that their interest lies in getting vehicle crime down.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Crime reduction task forces and regional directors are all very well, but my constituents in outer London are looking for more policemen in the community doing their job visibly and effectively. In those circumstances, can the Home Secretary justify the inadequacy of the funding by his Department to the police service? Is it not true that, in the past five years, Hillingdon division has seen a 14 per cent. drop in manpower—no fewer than 16 uniformed officers and civilians last year and a projected 17 next year? That is wholly inadequate and needs to be rectified, as the police consultative committee has put to him.

Mr. Straw: One of the things that I can claim to have done is to stem the reduction in funding to the Metropolitan police. I ensured that, from 1998–99, there was funding in the budgets that I set not just as the Home Secretary, but as the police authority for London, to stem the reduction in numbers, which had been severe in the previous five years.

The exact distribution of police officers within the Metropolitan police is a matter for the Commissioner. I will pass on to him the hon. Gentleman's concerns, but, at any level of policing, some police services and police divisions are able to deliver more effective reductions in crime than others. The Prime Minister and I were in the Medway area today. As a result of very good intelligence-led policing—not the addition of officers, but greater intensity of work by officers—the area has recorded a 26 per cent. reduction in burglary and nearly a 40 per cent. reduction in motor vehicle theft. It is about resources, but it is also, critically, about how those resources are used.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend is aware of the satisfaction among my constituents at the increase of £10.3 million in the Greater Manchester police budget for this year, which is equivalent to an increase of about £22 million over the past two years. That money will be well used by the excellent police force in our division. Recently, the representative of the police force, Superintendent Brinnand, attended a crowded meeting of my constituents at, ironically, in view of the dreadful events to which hon. Members have referred, Sacred Heart church in Gorton, where, among other things, my constituents asked for the extension of curfew orders to 16-year-olds. We look forward to that. We also look forward to my right hon. Friend adding impetus to the invocation of such orders and anti-social behaviour orders. Having told me in correspondence that he is happy to come to my constituency, will he give us a date?

Madam Speaker: Order. I ask not for statements, but for questions.

Mr. Straw: I am glad to know that the increase in the budget for Greater Manchester police has gone down well. In view of your comments, Madam Speaker, the answer to my right hon. Friend's last and direct question is that I will give him a date very soon.

Madam Speaker: That is the sort of answer that I like.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The Secretary of State knows that those who already live in the most unattractive parts of our towns and cities suffer disproportionately from crime. Will he make every effort that he can to ensure that the people who live in those areas can take responsibility for clearing up the mess that is a large part of making people feel that the area in which they live does not matter, so crime and disorder does not matter?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that areas that look neglected and have high levels of incivility suffer the highest levels of direct crime, such as burglary, robbery and vehicle crime, even if they may be similar to other inner-city areas in other respects. That is why we should all be highly intolerant of anti-social behaviour. Unless graffiti and criminal damage are nipped in the bud, an area will quickly graduate to more serious crime.

Mr. Paul Clark (Gillingham): I welcome the strategy. My right hon. Friend has already referred to his successful visit to Medway this morning with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to learn about the success of Kent county constabulary, particularly the police force in Medway, on Operation Radium, which has targeted car crime and domestic burglary. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the success was achieved through the careful use of the resources that were available to the police force, particularly through proactive intelligence and the multi-agency working approach?

Mr. Straw: Yes. I am glad that my hon. Friend was with the Prime Minister and me at the presentation today. He makes an important point. More police officers could have been used as bobbies on the beat, but the chief constable made a courageous and entirely correct decision that those resources would be better used on the careful targeting of the crime problems in the area. Crime has been reduced far more by that overall strategy than would have been the case if the officers had simply been on generalised patrol.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): There is an estate in Bransgore that has been tormented by under-age drinkers and miscreants for some time. On the 13th of this month, the police finally apprehended two of them lighting a fire—and they let them go! Has the

Secretary of State seen the survey of police morale published in national newspapers last week, showing that 50 per cent. of police officers are reluctant to make an arrest and that two thirds are looking for another job? What is there in his glossy strategy to answer that?

Mr. Straw: I have not seen the survey and I do not believe it. If the level of juvenile nuisance is so great that it is driving the hon. Gentleman and his constituents mad—as evidently it is—I suggest that he urges the local authority and the police to apply for an anti-social behaviour order. We have had similar problems in Blackburn. The police secured an anti-social behaviour order in respect of one offender and I understand that it has proved very effective.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement that he will ask police authorities and crime reduction partnerships to set five-year targets for reductions in vehicle crime, burglary and robbery. Will he set national targets for reductions in burglary and robbery in the same way that he has set a target of a 30 per cent. reduction in vehicle crime?

Mr. Straw: Because burglary and robbery are more local than vehicle crime, we intend to set a national target that will be an aggregate of the local targets, whereas for vehicle crime we have adopted the opposite approach.

Mr. Forth: Will the Home Secretary assess the contribution to crime reduction made by the closure of Chislehurst police station, caused directly by his underfunding of Bromley police in particular?

Mr. Straw: I wholly reject that point. The right hon. Gentleman has to explain his position to his constituents. On the one hand he calls, on their behalf, for increases in spending on the police, and, I dare say, on health and education. On the other, as a member of the extreme right wing of the Conservative party—he seems to be acknowledging the fact—he supports the shadow Chancellor's criticism of our levels of spending on the police and every other public service as reckless and irresponsible. He cannot have it both ways.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Will my right hon. Friend's strategy do anything about people who make wild, vexatious and unfounded criminal allegations in public? For example, is he aware that the Royal Bank of Scotland has said that it is satisfied that there is no evidence of any computer hacking into its accounts? Is it not time that the Tories apologised for their ridiculous Watergate-style conspiracy theories against Labour?

Mr. Straw: Our strategy is designed to deal with real incidents of crime, not with ludicrous allegations. I understand that, six days later, the Conservative party has provided no details whatever to back up its wild allegations. There is an offence of wasting police time and, unless we get details, the chairman of the Conservative party might well be considered a candidate for being charged with such an offence.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Minister of State, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) has just written to tell me that, after taking into account the increased area of Surrey police's responsibilities, its budget is to be cut. Why is that the force's reward for producing among the best figures that the Home Secretary listed today?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman knows that the distribution of police grant is based on the standard spending assessment, which is agreed by the police authorities, the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Government. However, it is not a formula over which any Home Secretary has ever sought control, and it is designed to distribute resources as fairly as possible. I well understand the concerns in Surrey, which I have sought partly to offset by the transitional grant—although I accept that that does not go the whole way. Surrey's problems illustrate that when the previous system operated before 1995–96, spending in Surrey was historically higher than in other comparable authorities. That is the root of the problem. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to see me about this matter, I shall be happy to arrange a meeting.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I welcome my right hon. Friend's determination to deal faster with young criminals. Is he aware of the evidence of the success of the restorative justice experiments in the Thames Valley area? Does he believe that there is some conflict between using restorative justice—where young criminals accused for the first time may be asked to confront the victims of their crime—and speeding up bringing such people to justice?

Mr. Straw: We are certainly aware of the value of the systems of restorative justice that have been pioneered in Thames Valley by Charles Pollard, the chief constable, which are now being rolled out across the country under the provisions of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999. There is no conflict between our determination to secure a halving of the time between arrest and sentence and restorative justice, as the procedures of restorative justice start at the beginning of the sentence, not the end. We have taken that into account.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The Home Secretary has been saying for years, rightly, how important it is to nip the plague of graffiti vandalism in the bud. What exactly will his strategy do to put that into practice?

Mr. Straw: There are serious problems of graffiti and criminal damage in many areas which sometimes require action by the police. Usually, however, they require action by the local authorities, voluntary agencies and the police working together. I have seen a number of examples where the local authority has 24-hour anti-graffiti patrols or better lighting, where the authority is applying to the Government for closed circuit television and where the police are taking a properly oriented approach to those difficulties. Every single page of the document is designed to improve the safety and tranquillity of the hon. Gentleman's constituency, as well as the other 500 or so constituencies in England and Wales.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I welcome the increased money for CCTV and for DNA testing—something that the general public will understand

[Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours]

to be a good investment. Is not the best way to reduce crime to reduce unemployment, which is precisely what we are doing? Is not that why the new deal really works? In the 1980s, when unemployment was rising, crime was rising and, in the 1990s, as unemployment has fallen, crime has fallen. Was not the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), probably correct?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is right. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has often said, the new deal is not only an economic programme but a programme to reduce crime. One of the encouraging examples that we were shown today in the Medway area was of new deal people being used to fit locks and bolts onto people's houses. Jobs were being provided, which is one way of getting down crime, and the targets were being hardened, which is another.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): When members of the public voluntarily give DNA samples as part of a mass screening in a murder inquiry, for example, is it the Home Secretary's intention to allow those samples to be retained on a database with the member of the public's consent?

Mr. Straw: Yes.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the success of his strategy will depend not only on the police, but on the partnerships in which they are being asked to engage? Historically, we have tried to secure efficiency through the inspectorate of constabulary; perhaps we need a body with wider powers if we are to eliminate the discrepancies in efficiency.

Mr. Straw: I agree. That is why I announced today that joint inspections would be conducted by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and the Audit Commission, so that the other partners in the partnerships against crime are subject to the same rigorous assessment as the police.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The Home Secretary rightly said that it is a priority to reduce administration and bureaucracy for the police. What estimate has he made of the additional work load imposed on senior police officers, in particular, by his own crime and disorder legislation?

Mr. Straw: I have not made an estimate. Senior police officers and operational officers throughout the country tell me that they regard the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 as the most important single anti-crime measure to be passed by the House since the war. They wanted it and they are delivering it. I am grateful to them.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the 20 per cent. reduction in crime in Lancashire. I urge him to get local partnerships to pay especial attention to the horrendous problem of street crime, which can have the most devastating consequences for its victims and leads to the widespread fear of crime, contributing to the decline of the value of visits to town and village centres and rural centres. Does he agree that street crime is more a matter for partnerships between local authorities and the police than some other crimes, which require more emphasis on evidence-led policing?

Mr. Straw: Street crime is terrible wherever it takes place and can cause great fear. I know that my hon. Friend is making great efforts with the local authority and the Lancashire constabulary to tackle street crime. Exactly how it is tackled is a matter for the police and the local partnerships but part of the purpose of our crime reduction investment, including in closed circuit television and police targeted hot-spotting, is designed precisely to tackle street crime.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Why has not the Home Secretary implemented the recommendations of a recent internal Home Office report, which clearly stated that the sparsity factor should be taken into account when policing rural areas?

Mr. Straw: Because we said that we would not make changes in the standard spending assessment for three years. I understand the concerns about rural policing. Incidentally, the same concerns about policing levels are felt by hon. Members in inner urban areas, as they always will be. Under the guidance for the bidding for money from the crime-fighting fund for the additional 5,000 officers, we will invite bids that take into account, among other things, the need to improve crime fighting in rural areas.

Mr. Ivan Henderson (Harwich): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement on the drug referral scheme. I have in my constituency an excellent drug rehabilitation group, the Open Road. Will such groups be involved in the initiative and will they have adequate funding to help them to help the Government to combat the drug problem?

Mr. Straw: The drug action teams should be fully involved in the crime reduction partnerships, because they are an integral part of tackling drug-related crime, which probably accounts for about half of all acquisitive crime. On the issue of resources, what is crucial in drug treatment—even more so than in policing—is not only the total amount invested, but the need to ensure that the money is properly used to purchase adequate numbers of treatments. The bureaucracy that has grown up around some drug action teams must be broken down to ensure a real and direct connection between the young people—as they are typically—who need drug treatment quickly, and the delivery of that treatment. In some areas, the contracts for drug treatment have been re-let, and twice—or more—the treatments are provided for the same amount of money than before.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it will be critical to the success of his strategy—we all hope that it will be successful—that those who are guilty are convicted? Will he, therefore, agree to look again at the rule that states that a jury may not, except in exceptional circumstances, be entitled to know about the previous convictions of the person appearing before them? Was it his experience in the past as a barrister, as it was mine as a solicitor, that sometimes juries look on in stark disbelief when they have

acquitted someone as they realise that he is to be dealt with for offences to which he has already pleaded guilty and for which he has previous convictions? I accept that the Home Secretary cannot revisit that territory immediately, but will he agree to do so, in the context of his strategy?

Mr. Straw: That is one of the most difficult areas of the law of evidence. People's previous character should not be dragged gratuitously into trials as proof of their guilt of the offences with which they are charged. Previous character should be adduced only if it is probative of the offence for which they are being tried. As the hon. Gentleman will know, if a defendant challenges the character of any witness, he has to put his own character in. We have no plans to change the law in that area, and I understand that the Law Commission has considered the issue of character. It may consider it again and, if it does, we shall consider its report. The current rules exist to ensure not only that the guilty are convicted, but that the innocent—including those with previous convictions who are innocent—are not unjustly convicted.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the huge frustration in many communities, not least in my constituency, at the failure of the police and local authorities, such as Gedling borough council, to use the anti-social behaviour orders—the parenting and curfew orders—and allow young people to terrorise the elderly and people who live near parks? Will he do all he can to continue to encourage local authorities and the police to use those orders to tackle that blight on our communities?

Mr. Straw: Yes, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on the leadership that he is showing—as I know from my right hon. Friend the Minister of State—in his constituency. It is frustrating, because those police services and local authorities that have used anti-social behaviour orders—or injunctions in respect of social housing tenants—have discovered that they can solve the problem more effectively than by simply resorting to charging those involved with minor public order offences, and they can save time, and much money, in the future.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I, too, welcome any attempt to connect the drug misuser with responsive treatment services. However, there are long waiting lists of volunteers for treatment at the moment despite what my right hon. Friend has said. Can he assure me that adequate training programmes exist to get enough people in place by 2001 and will he also recognise that up to 50 per cent. of those presenting for treatment are also likely be suffering from mental illness? That is not widely recognised, but if we do not begin to recognise dual diagnosis, the revolving door will merely spin faster.

Mr. Straw: We are investing considerable additional resources in drug treatment and testing, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and I are examining whether that money is well spent. Of course I understand that many of those with serious drug addiction problems—I do not know the exact number—also have problems with mental illness. We must stop such people committing crimes if we are to ensure that they are properly treated.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): Will my right hon. Friend remind the police and local authorities that anti-social behaviour orders can be used to deal with anti-social behaviour in privately owned or rented dwellings? After all, if such anti-social behaviour occurred in a council or housing association property, those responsible could be subject to eviction.

Mr. Straw: One reason why we designed the anti-social behaviour orders was because of the concern of local authorities and the police that the avenue of an eviction order was not available, in most cases, for tenants of private landlords. Anti-social behaviour orders can be used to deal with private tenants, owner-occupiers, juveniles over 10, and they do not have to be used as a last resort.

Orders of the Day

Electronic Communications Bill

[Relevant documents: The Trade and Industry Committee reported on the Draft Electronic Communications Bill in its Fourteenth Report of Session 1998–99, HC 862. Its Seventh Report, on Building Confidence in Electronic Commerce: The Government's Proposals, HC 187, and the Government's response thereto, contained in Promoting Electronic Commerce, Cm 4417.]

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I should inform the House that I have selected the amendment which stands in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

4.36 pm

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

When my grandmother left Britain nearly 100 years ago, it took her months to reach Australia, and it took months for her first letter to reach home. These days, a letter takes less than a week, but an e-mail takes less than a minute. That is just one small example of how our world is being transformed by electronic networks.

The Electronic Communications Bill will modernise our laws for the world of e-mail and the internet. It is just part of our strategy to make this country the best place in the world for electronic commerce.

Electronic networks—the convergence of communications and computing—are changing everything. They destroy jobs and create new ones at quite terrifying speed. Already in the United Kingdom, one in six people works for companies that did not exist five years ago. Networks have transformed global trade, creating financial markets in which billions of dollars are moved around the world daily. They are transforming manufacturing, allowing global teams of engineers to work around the world, around the clock, designing new products and testing them in simulation before the prototype is even built. They are transforming education, and they will certainly transform politics. Indeed, I must congratulate the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) on achieving a parliamentary first—an electronic petition. I am not sure whether the House is yet equipped to receive an electronic petition electronically—I fear not. When I saw the electronic petition in my in-box this morning, and when I saw "You've got mail", I confess that I was not thinking of the hon. Gentleman.

Our goal is clear. This country led the world into the first industrial revolution, and now we are determined to be winners in the new economy. Our strategy for that is also clear. We need modern, competitive markets that will enable the fast growth of electronic commerce; confident consumers with the skills and access to exploit the potential of the internet; and a leading-edge Government, who are exploiting to the full the potential of the new technologies to transform the ways in which we deliver services to citizens and citizens communicate with the Government.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): One of the biggest impediments to the use of the internet in my constituency, where incomes are generally low, is the cost. How can British Telecom retain the right to charge people at the current level and deny millions of people the access that we believe that they should have, and that is enjoyed by people in the United States of America and other countries? Can my hon. Friend reassure me that the Government are doing something about this? BT will hang on to its profits like grim death and concede nothing unless it is pushed.

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of reducing internet access costs. I represent a similar constituency, and low-income consumers—indeed, all consumers—can already benefit at weekends and off-peak times from some of the lowest internet access charges in the world. The real difficulty arises with peak-time access. We need to get the costs of that down, and we need tariffs that allow unmetered access. Oftel has made it clear repeatedly that there is no regulatory barrier to that, and it is considering BT's recent proposal for a new wholesale pricing system. Today, Oftel announced a new consultation on the matter of digital subscriber lines in the local loop; tomorrow, it will announce its decision on local loop unbundling, and how it intends to progress on that matter.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Mr. Brian White.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: My hon. Friend the Minister—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that the Minister will assist me. When several hon. Members stand to intervene in her speech, it would help to know to whom she is giving way.

Ms Hewitt: I apologise.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: My hon. Friend the Minister said that there was no regulatory obstacle to getting costs down. However, BT is recognised to be the main provider: it has a real monopoly, and needs to be pushed. Costs will be reduced not because BT volunteers to lose some profits, but because the company will be required by Parliament to do so—even though we recognise that it is a private company. My constituents want the same free, day-time service from BT that internet users in America enjoy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I appeal to hon. Members to make short interventions, especially if they are repetitive.

Ms Hewitt: I have already made BT aware of my views, and of the Government's objective in this matter. However, I remind my hon. Friend that BT has to set interconnection charges that are fair. Because of that, prices are already coming down. A wholesaler unhappy with the interconnection price offered by BT can go to Oftel, which will make a determination in the matter.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Is not one of the problems the length of time taken by Oftel to come to a judgment? Can Oftel's investigations be speeded up?

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Oftel is increasingly aware—as are Ministers—of the need to move in internet years, rather than in parliamentary or calendar years.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In a speech given in Cambridge on 13 September, the Prime Minister said that the Government attach a great deal of importance to getting their policy on e-commerce right. What assessment has the Minister made of the recent survey showing that two thirds of e-commerce companies feel let down by the Government's proposals? What is her assessment of the verdict of Mr. David Grossman, of the distinguished solicitors firm Berwin Leighton, that the industry was "distinctly underwhelmed" by the Government's proposals?

Ms Hewitt: I am extremely sorry that the hon. Gentleman has not been listening to industry, but that is typical of Conservative Members these days. In fact, Bill Gates and Microsoft have already described the Bill as a model for Europe. In addition, Intel, IBM and other major industry players in this country have welcomed the Bill. I hope that the House will do the same.

The Bill will help us to get the market framework right. It will build trust in the authenticity, confidentiality and security of on-line transactions. It will confirm the legal validity of electronic signatures, a matter for which business has pressed urgently. It will enable us to modernise the statute book by allowing the Government to amend references to paper signatures, documents and records—there are about 40,000 such references so far—to include their electronic equivalents.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): Would it surprise my hon. Friend the Minister to know that the pharmaceutical industry, in which I used to work, has been pressing for that measure on electronic signatures since the mid-1990s? The Conservative Government of the time did nothing about it.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes exactly the right point. I shall come to the record of the Opposition in a moment. The Bill is the product of extensive consultation, which finally began in the dying days of the previous Administration. In March 1997, the then Conservative Administration consulted on proposals to introduce a mandatory licence scheme for trust service providers, with mandatory key escrow. In April 1998, one of my predecessors, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), announced that we were abandoning the Conservative party's approach. In March, we consulted again on our voluntary approval scheme. In July, we published the draft Bill for further consultation.

At least some Opposition Members have abandoned the view that they held in government. The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) said:

"I welcome the fact that the right hon. Gentleman has fileted from the previous draft of the Bill various aspects of the statutory trusted third party regime. I have recanted proposals that I made when I was a Minister".—[*Official Report*, 19 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 241.]

He was right to recant because, as he recognises, the policy of this Government has been quite different from that of our predecessors.

The Conservatives wanted a system of mandatory licensing for trust service providers. That was rejected by industry. We have always preferred a voluntary approval scheme. The Conservatives wanted a system of mandatory key escrow that would have required users of encryption to deposit copies of the keys protecting their confidential data to be lodged with a third party. We listened to business and industry and ruled that out in March. In May, we published a Cabinet Office study that confirmed that partnership with industry rather than mandatory key escrow was the best way to meet law enforcement concerns. Clause 13 explicitly prohibits key escrow requirements being imposed in any order made under the Bill.

Now the Conservatives tell us that they will oppose the Bill until the European Union has sorted out every issue to do with the framework of statutory regulation and private international law. I know that the Conservative party has lost touch with business and is obsessed with the single issue of Europe but, even for it, that is ridiculous. Increasingly, the Tory party reminds me of some of the computer games that our children seem to enjoy so much: Aliens 3, starring the hapless Leader of the Opposition; Quake 2—follow the latest upheaval in the Conservative party as it gets stuck further and further in sleaze; and Tomb Raider—await the return of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo).

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My hon. Friend mentioned Microsoft. Has she seen this morning's letter from its chairman, David Svendsen, congratulating the Government on introducing legislation that will serve as a model for Europe? Does that not contradict the position adopted by the official Opposition?

Ms Hewitt: Precisely so. If British people and British businesses are to win the benefits of electronic commerce, we need this Bill. We were determined to get the Bill right and to get it soon. We will achieve both goals.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Does the hon. Lady really think that she has delivered the Bill as soon as she could have? She said in a press release:

"We are determined to get e-commerce law right and to get it in fast."

The Bill was in the Queen's Speech last year, but was not published in its final form during the period covered by it. Does she agree with the Labour-dominated Select Committee on Trade and Industry that the Government have been moving as fast as a glacier on this?

Ms Hewitt: That is a bit rich coming from a supporter of a Government who did nothing whatsoever about the matter until their final weeks. We made it clear that we want the Bill to achieve Royal Assent by next April. I have no doubt that we are on track.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Does the Minister agree that, if regulation is to apply, it must be transparent and justiciable? Will she comment on the case raised by Article XIX in which the Lord Chancellor has closed a website simply because he does not accept that its content is appropriate or suitable? Will she ensure that, if the Government wish to take action against electronic communication, they do so within the law?

Ms Hewitt: I am not aware of the details of the case to which the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) refers. The law applies on-line just as it does off-line: I am sure that he supports that.

I shall return to the European legal framework, but, first, I draw the House's attention to an important change that we have made to the Bill since the consultation draft.

[Ms Hewitt]

The draft Bill included provisions to modernise the powers of the law enforcement agencies. Those provisions are essential because, unfortunately, the internet is transforming crime as much as it is transforming commerce. It provides new opportunities for money launderers, for fraudsters and for those who trade in child pornography.

I am sure that all Members of the House agree that the police must have adequate powers to deal with such crime. If they have the power—under warrant, for example—to seize a suspect's files or to intercept his communications, they must also have the power, if those files or communications are encrypted, either to obtain the material in plain text or to obtain the key to decipher it.

Those measures were originally included in the consultation draft, but will now be included in the Bill for the regulation of investigatory powers, to be introduced during this Session by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke). Much of the response to the draft Electronic Communications Bill concentrated on those law enforcement measures. I know that my hon. Friend will consider that response carefully before the investigatory powers Bill is finalised. I also know that he will take into account the concerns of business—especially those of the internet service providers—as to the possible costs to them of those measures. Indeed, I shall ensure that their concerns are effectively and strongly represented to the Home Office. Furthermore, the Bill—like every Bill introduced by the Government—will be compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998. The debate on the Bill will give right hon. and hon. Members ample opportunity to discuss those important law enforcement issues.

The first aim of the Electronic Communications Bill is to build trust among consumers and businesses in the providers of trust services. There is widespread agreement as to the need for a kitemark, so that consumers and business alike can trust the providers of cryptography and confidentiality services. They need to be sure that messages will not be altered en route, that their credit card details will be kept secure and that their signature will not be misused. Our strong preference is for self-regulation, and I am working closely with the Alliance for Electronic Business, which is drawing up a self-regulatory approvals scheme. The alliance has made good progress; last Friday, I received an update, which I am urgently assessing. The proposals demonstrate the commitment of the industry to the self-regulatory approach—companies such as British Telecommunications plc, IBM and Royal Mail are involved.

Our policy is underpinned by the principle of co-regulation, which is especially suited to the world of the internet. Co-regulation means that the Government should define the public policy objectives, but that industry should deliver the solutions through self-regulation.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Will the hon. Lady tell us when that new regime will be in place? Will she publish a timetable to tell us exactly when it will be finalised and up and running?

Ms Hewitt: During the passage of the Bill, I shall report on the progress made by the Alliance for Electronic Business, and shall try to publish a timetable for the introduction of the scheme.

The point of co-regulation is that legislation should be used only when self-regulation does not deliver. Part I thus provides a statutory default option. In July, we spelt out the criteria for a kitemark for this sector; they include a broad coverage of industry sectors and of its range of services, consumer representation, clear standards and the ability to ensure compliance and to meet EU standards so that British businesses and consumers can take advantage of the single market.

I am confident that self-regulation will work, but the industry is fast-moving, and self-regulation is at an early stage. It would be irresponsible to do what the Opposition appear to suggest—to abandon the possibility of a statutory scheme in future. The sensible course is to work with industry on self-regulation—as we are doing—but to create a statutory default option in case we need it.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): By what criteria will the Minister deem a voluntary regime to have succeeded or to have failed?

Ms Hewitt: We have already published—and I just summarised—the criteria by which we shall judge a self-regulatory scheme. Once the Bill receives Royal Assent, we shall hold part I in reserve, in case self-regulation fails. Then, in 2004, we shall conduct an open review of how self-regulation is working; and, provided that it is working well, the powers in part I will lapse, according to the provisions of clause 15.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that, even if a statutory scheme is introduced, it will still be open to any commercial provider who is not satisfied with the clauses to operate outside the scheme—that it will be statutory in the sense of a Government register but not in the sense of a compulsion?

Ms Hewitt: I am happy to give my hon. Friend the assurance that he wants. We rejected the mandatory approach that our predecessors had adopted, so any statutory scheme, were it to be introduced under part I, would still be voluntary.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Would it not be more straightforward if the Minister, instead of putting propositions before the House now to save her face and that of her colleagues, admitted that her Department had made a mistake and that part I was not needed, but said that it would be possible later, if self-regulation was not working, to come back and justify the introduction of part I on the basis of the evidence available at the time?

Hon. Members: U-turn.

Ms Hewitt: The Opposition are in an extraordinary state. On one hand, we hear that we are not moving fast enough. On the other, we are told, "Do not do this. Find the parliamentary time and introduce a fresh Bill if we need it." It is much more sensible to take the approach that we are taking.

Part II confirms the legal validity of electronic signatures.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): I hope that the hon. Lady does not distinguish between me as the

unofficial Opposition and Members on the Opposition Front Bench as the official Opposition in these matters. However, having been the Minister mentioned as having recanted, as it were, may I ask the hon. Lady to clarify two things? First, can she confirm what the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry told me on 19 November 1999—that the Home Office Bill for the regulation of investigatory powers will not override her desire for a voluntary system? Secondly, can she confirm that the Government, in their dealings with business and consumers, will not adopt a key escrow system? If they do, it may well become the de facto system that others will have to adopt.

Ms Hewitt: It is a pleasure to hear from the unofficial Opposition, and I am happy to reassure the hon. Gentleman on both the points that he raises. There is no suggestion of the Home Office, in its Bill, taking over the self-regulatory scheme that we are pursuing with the Alliance for Electronic Business or seeking to substitute its own powers for the statutory default powers in part I.

I repeat that mandatory key escrow has not been part of the Government's policy since March 1999. We have ruled it out from the Bill so that it cannot be introduced under part I or part II. Part II deals with the conditions on which electronic transactions may take place between Government and the citizen.

Part II—

Mr. St. Aubyn: On part I, what assurance can the Minister give the House that if, at some time before 2004, she conducts a review of how self-regulation is working, she will not at that stage have to introduce amendments to the Bill in the light of the fast-changing scene that we all know is represented by e-commerce?

Ms Hewitt: In a world that is changing rapidly, we have to try to make the legislation that we pass today as flexible and future-proof as we can. That is why the Bill is drafted on the basis of technological neutrality. It is not designed to prescribe, or to surround with conditions, any specific type of technology. That is very important in relation to the provisions in part II that will confirm the legal validity of electronic signatures.

Mr. Gibb: Will the Minister come to the House if she decides to invoke part I or will it be invoked through an order? Will the House have any say?

Ms Hewitt: I am happy to assure the hon. Gentleman that I would, of course, come to the House in those circumstances.

Mr. Gibb: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Hewitt: I shall give way one last time.

Mr. Gibb: The Minister has missed the point. As currently drafted, if part I is invoked, the Bill does not require a statutory instrument to be introduced under either the affirmative or negative resolution procedure. What assurances can she give the House that it will have a say and a vote on whether part I is invoked? .

Ms Hewitt: I have just given the hon. Gentleman an assurance in what I thought was plain English.

Mr. Duncan: It was ambiguous.

Ms Hewitt: It was not ambiguous. If the hon. Gentleman wants to pursue the point in Committee, I am sure that we can spend many a happy hour on it.

Part II also gives Ministers the powers to update the statute book by providing electronic equivalents to paper signatures, records and documents. Lawyers argue about whether electronic signatures would be recognised as valid by the courts, but we cannot afford to wait while lawyers argue and the courts decide. Instead, clause 7 will allow businesses and consumers to have confidence in electronic signatures, because it puts beyond doubt that a court can admit evidence of an electronic signature and a certificate in support of that signature not only to establish from whom the communication came, but to establish the date and time at which it was sent and whether it was intended to have legal effect.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Will the Minister help the House by explaining when clause 7 will be implemented? What is the timetable?

Ms Hewitt: I anticipate that clause 7 will come into force immediately that the Bill has secured Royal Assent. I think that the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, of which the hon. Gentleman is a member, particularly supported this measure.

As some of my hon. Friends have said, the proposals for electronic signatures have been widely welcomed by industry. For example, Intel said that it was

"delighted that government . . . is focusing on the real issue of legal recognition of electronic signatures which will give a vital boost to business and consumer confidence".

We also have to modernise the statute book to enable electronic transactions between citizens and government, and between citizens themselves, to take place. Clause 8 will therefore give the Government and the Scottish Administration the power to sweep away obstacles in existing laws that insist on the use of paper and formalities, such as sealing and—if my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness will forgive me for mentioning it—the requirements to deliver documents through the post. The clause will give people the option of using electronic means when they prefer to do so.

I am pleased to announce that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office has agreed that the Cabinet Office's central information technology unit will now co-ordinate the use of that power to ensure the equivalence of electronic and paper ways of doing business with government. We want Departments to use those powers quickly, and the Cabinet Office will lead the drive across government to ensure that that happens.

Mr. Ian Taylor: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way twice to me. Can she assure me that there will be consistency across government in putting those powers

[Mr. Ian Taylor]

into practice? Will the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise join everyone else, or will they devise their own systems?

Ms Hewitt: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the need for consistent and open standards across government and the Cabinet Office will certainly continue in that co-ordinating role. The Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise have already taken the power in the Finance Act 1999 to conduct their own modernisation of their relevant statute book. I am delighted that the Inland Revenue will shortly offer on-line tax filing for businesses and individuals as will Customs and Excise for VAT filing.

The Department of Trade and Industry will use the power that we shall obtain under the Bill to amend company law, so that companies can communicate electronically with shareholders and so that shareholders can lodge proxies, including voting instructions, on-line. Such measures will save the companies and shareholders that take advantage of them significant sums of money. I therefore propose to publish a draft order for consultation early in the new year, so that it can be introduced and take effect as soon as the Bill receives Royal Assent. I shall announce other plans to make use of clause 8 powers during the Bill's parliamentary passage.

Part III modernises the out-dated system for modifying telecommunications licences. There is widespread agreement in the industry that a more flexible and responsive approach to licence modification is essential. I have to say, however, that the industry was unhappy with our proposed mechanism, particularly the proposal that the Director General of Oftel should be able to make modifications without a reference to the Competition Commission, despite objections, provided that those objections did not constitute a significant minority. Following our discussions with the industry, we have considered that proposal further and decided not to proceed with the "significant minority" concept.

We are continuing to discuss possible alternatives with the industry. As I informed Opposition Front-Bench Members earlier this afternoon, I should like to make it clear that I will table amendments in Committee to simplify our proposals and ensure that they command wider support.

We have to get right our own legal framework, and we are doing so, but we also have to get right the European and global frameworks, and we are working to do that too. There is a very big prize to be won in the European Union—a single market for electronic commerce. Tomorrow, at the European Union Telecommunications Council, we shall adopt the electronic signatures directive. That sets out a legal framework for EU-wide recognition of electronic signatures, the establishment of approval schemes for service providers and the liability of providers. We are anticipating the directive in the Bill, and I am surprised that the official Opposition have not congratulated us for doing so, instead of carping in their amendment.

The next priority is to complete the electronic commerce directive. As drafted, the directive enshrines the principle of the trader's country of origin. In other words, a British company complying with British regulation should be able to sell on-line to consumers in any other member state. We believe that that is the right way to legislate for electronic commerce.

Over the past year, the Brussels convention has been under review. As hon. Members will know, that convention governs the issue of which court can hear a private law dispute between residents of different member states, including disputes about certain consumer contracts. The European Commission has now prepared a proposal to convert it, with amendments, into a community regulation.

The Brussels convention has existed for 31 years and, in that time, almost no consumer has used it to sue for breach of contract. None the less, the Commission sought to extend its provisions to electronic commerce by providing in a draft recital that any website that could be accessed from another member state would thereby qualify as advertising directed at consumers in that member state and could activate the convention's provisions. That, of course, misses the point that, on the internet, any website is, by definition, accessible from anywhere else. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that there is growing agreement among member states with our view that the new recital should be dropped.

We anticipate review next year of the Rome convention, which deals with the issue of which jurisdiction takes effect in private international law. We shall play a full part in those discussions, but we cannot possibly wait until they are resolved to introduce the electronic commerce directive or the Bill. Instead, we need to put forward our own proposals to ensure effective protection of consumers in the world of e-commerce.

It is consumers, above all, who stand to benefit from e-commerce. Price transparency will be a boon to consumers throughout the European Union and beyond. I welcome the fact that at least one leading car manufacturer has already announced that it will sell its own models on the internet throughout the European Union, and I know that others are planning to follow suit.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): This is a terribly interesting issue. Where will European, American and Japanese car manufacturers pay corporation tax and VAT? Is there a European understanding of how that will work with sales on the internet?

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend raises an extremely interesting point. I refer him to an excellent discussion paper on that subject, which was published by the Inland Revenue last Friday. In any case, there is a clear set of EU rules governing VAT liability. Those have not given rise to problems as they have been translated into the sphere of electronic commerce.

We have to ensure that consumers are protected from unfair dealing on the internet; they need to know which suppliers they can trust. That is why we are working with consumer groups to develop TrustUK as a hallmark, to ensure that consumers are given clear and fair contracts, truthful advertisements and clear and accurate information about what they are buying, prices, delivery costs, the returns policy, and so on. We can now work with our

European partners to create a TrustEurope equivalent, building on the provisions of the new distance selling directive.

Dr. Palmer: Will the kitemark be available to companies based elsewhere that want to operate within the European Union, or will it be restricted to companies based within the EU, initially within the UK?

Ms Hewitt: We envisage that the TrustUK mark will be available to companies that sign up to approved codes of practice that provide both proper consumer protection and effective alternative means of dispute resolution. The issue is not where the company is based, but whether it offers proper consumer protection through an effective code of practice and effective dispute resolution mechanisms.

The Bill will be Britain's first 21st century law. It was the first Bill referred to in the Queen's Speech; it was the first to be introduced; and, tonight, it will become the first to receive Second Reading. It will bring our statute book into the 21st century, provide a sound legal basis for electronic commerce and electronic government, and help to build consumer and business confidence in trading on the internet.

The Conservatives' opposition to the Bill provides further evidence of how out of touch and out of date they are. While they remain stuck in sleaze, we shall legislate in the interests of the country as a whole. While they are stuck in the past, we shall legislate for the future. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.12 pm

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Electronic Communications Bill because it introduces a completely unnecessary element of regulation in the supervision of electronic commerce which will damage the United Kingdom's lead in this field and because no proper consideration has been given to the manner in which United Kingdom law will interact with impending EU law, in particular with regard to the jurisdiction that will govern electronic trade."

I should do the House the courtesy of drawing its attention to my interest, which is fully registered in the Register of Members' Interests.

We are dealing not with some sort of techno-fad but with an important matter that increasingly affects the lives of millions. We are in the middle of a fantastic technological revolution and the Opposition accept the need for an element of legislation to facilitate that revolution's advance. Britain has a golden opportunity to put itself well ahead of the game, but the Government's slow handling of the issue risks relegating us from the premier league to the second or third division. There is a strange division between those who, faced with that revolution, champ at the bit and those who remain completely bamboozled. The revolution offers information, communication and trading networks, but the Bill is primarily concerned with the third category—electronic commerce.

E-commerce is a much misunderstood term. Despite forest-loads of hype, many outside the world of information technology retain a vague notion that e-commerce has something to do with selling books and CDs over the internet and with dull brochures and junk mail served up on screen instead of posted through the letter box. The commercial internet is still in its infancy, but it is growing prodigiously. Only six years ago, Europe was considered an internet backwater, with a mere 200,000 computers connected to it; now, 50 million Europeans are believed to be connected. The "Computer Industry Almanac" predicts that, by the end of 2000, 327 million people around the world will have internet access. It is forecast that that dramatic increase in the number of people on-line will lead to an explosion in global e-commerce revenues: one report estimates 183 million on-line buyers spending more than $1 trillion by 2003.

Impressive as those figures are, I would argue that they partly miss the point about what e-commerce is. It is not only about massive numbers or about who is or who is not making a profit on-line. It is about how this fledgling technology can transform entire industries and enable companies to reach markets that were previously unattainable. It is also about saving money by moving core business processes on-line, such as customer service, shareholder communication, procurement and supply-chain management. Above all, it is about creating and experimenting with new business models such as Priceline, which lets consumers suggest their own price for everything from new cars to holidays and mortgages, or about computer companies that allow customers to configure their own personal computers on-line and use sites that offer direct access to the travel industry's computer database.

E-commerce is also about the way in which companies re-engineer their businesses. Encyclopaedia Britannica International Ltd. no longer employs salesmen to lug heavy tomes from door to door. Instead, it sells student subscriptions to its multimedia website to colleges and universities around the world.

Britain can and must be the nerve centre of the worldwide business revolution. This is a world in which there is a mini revolution every week. British businesses will not forgive us if we do not act fast and with a clear head. *[Interruption.]* In one respect the Government seem to support the same objective—they talk as though they share that objective. As in so many other areas of policy, they have adopted convincing language. In his speech at Cambridge, the Prime Minister said that

"we need to be quick on our feet."

Some might think that he has been quite busy off his feet recently. However, the Government have not been quick off their feet because the Bill has been a very long time coming. Anyone who has paid any attention to the progress of the Bill knows that it has been the product of a messy turf war between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Home Office, which have been squabbling for more than two years. The Bill was promised last year but it never came.

Dr. Ladyman: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will enlighten me by explaining how his call for more speed ties in with an amendment that calls for less speed.

Mr. Duncan: The reasoned amendment calls for less legislation. It was completely misrepresented by the Minister when she said that the Opposition are calling for nothing to be done until everything has been done in Europe. Rather, we are saying that Britain should proceed now, but in a simple way with a shorter Bill that is not so cumbersome and laden.

[Mr. Duncan]

It is the Government who have taken their time. They have said for years that they will appoint an e-envoy. At last they have got round to doing so, but he will not be at his desk until January.

Mr. White: If the hon. Gentleman is so concerned about speed, why did not the Opposition agree to a carry-over motion in July and table amendments in Committee? Their objective could have been achieved in that way.

Mr. Duncan: I shall specifically address that issue.

It is hardly surprising that the Government have been so slow. Although they talk much about IT and about how they believe in it, their track record in implementing it in their own house is abysmal. Much of what they try to do in government immediately crashes.

The essence of the internet revolution is that it divides clearly into e-government and e-commerce. The internet is a fantastic mechanism for improving the delivery of government. That is certainly what the Government say, but in practice everything that they touch crashes. About 500,000 people had to wait for a passport in the summer because computers would not work. The Inland Revenue could not properly implement its new system of self-assessment, and a crash led to the absurdity of 56,000 people receiving an apology for being sent the wrong sort of threatening letter.

The Government may speak the language of IT, but in practice their IT crashes. As if that were not enough, they set themselves a target. In 1997, the Prime Minister pledged that 25 per cent. of Government services would be available electronically by 2002. An inter-departmental audit of Government dealings soon afterwards found that 38 per cent. of them were already capable of being conducted electronically. Perhaps the Government think that a target that takes them backwards is easier to achieve.

Worst of all, the Government, pretending that they favour IT and the great internet revolution, plan to introduce IR35—a £500 million e-tax that would drive people abroad. The supreme irony is that those who helped to create the technology to produce the e-signature for which the Bill provides will face a sustained attack from a Government who say one thing and do another.

The Minister was kind enough to refer to the e-petition that I electronically signed this morning. We started it on Friday and we had thousands of names by Sunday evening. Many more thousands came in today, at the rate of one every five seconds at its peak. This is the first electronically signed petition. I look forward to the electronic reply, which I trust the Minister will send in due course.

The Secretary of State, however, is a little slow off the mark. As I walked into the Chamber this afternoon, I saw on the board a press notice informing us that in a week the Secretary of State will become the first British Cabinet Minister to become a digital signatory. He is a little behind the times, and in internet time a week is a decade.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. As he has collected so many signatures on the subject of IR35, will he tell the House whether he believes that an IT subcontractor earning £18,000 a year should pay the same level of national insurance contributions as a nurse or a teacher on £18,000 a year, or whether, as some—some—who wish to evade tax would suggest, that person should be able to escape paying any national insurance contributions at all?

Mr. Duncan: The Minister knows perfectly well that those who are employed as a limited company are doing so legally and that she is replacing their ability to help Britain lead the internet revolution with a £500 million tax, which will be detrimental to Britain's future and to theirs.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Duncan: I give way to the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer).

Dr. Palmer: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I came to the Chamber in the belief that we would be debating electronic communications and commerce. We seem to be debating tax. Is that in order?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have heard nothing out of order so far.

Mr. Duncan: It seems that the Labour Government are about to add insult to injury. According to *The Independent on Sunday*, not only are they driving thousands of people out of Britain by taxing them more, to the tune of £500 million, but it seems that they are to give visa exemptions so that people from overseas can come into Britain if they can add to the IT revolution. How does the Minister square kicking people out with bringing them in with special exemptions?

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Would his party reverse the change if it were in government?

Mr. Duncan: I am sure that, unlike the Labour party, we will stick to what we say in the run-up to an election.

Mr. Campbell-Savours *rose—*

Mr. Miller *rose—*

Mr. Duncan: I shall give way in a moment, but I want to make some progress.

The Government have been unable to get their house in order and have made a complete hash of e-government. In contrast, our approach to e-commerce is entirely clear. We believe in minimum interference.

Mr. Miller: Before the hon. Gentleman leaves the issue of the petition, will he confirm that the website from which the petition was derived has been up and running for several months, and that it is not the instantaneous vehicle that he claimed? Will he answer the question from

my hon. Friend the Minister? What would he do about the national insurance contributions of IT contractors on £18,000, as opposed to those of nurses on £18,000?

Mr. Duncan: I am happy to confirm to the hon. Gentleman that we collected all the names over the weekend.

Mr. Miller: Rubbish.

Mr. Duncan: I defy the hon. Gentleman to disprove me. We announced the petition on Friday and received 1,700 signatures over the weekend and a further 2,000 this morning, witnessed by many people. Even in the 20 minutes during which I held a press conference this morning, a further 387 signatures came in.

Mr. Campbell-Savours *rose—*

Mr. Duncan: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman.

The Government invited us to allow the e-commerce Bill, as everyone believed it was called, to be introduced in the last Session and carried over. We rightly refused because we were not prepared to aid and abet the passage of a dog's dinner of a Bill, which would have been burdensome and detrimental to the progress of the revolution that we support. We knew the Bill's main contents and we were not happy. At least we thought that key escrow had been rejected and I was pleased to hear the Minister confirm that today. However, only a few groups were adequately consulted in a secretive, cosy process. The Minister shakes her head, but the Government did not properly consult small, infant companies, which are at the cutting edge of the progress that we support. The consultation process concentrated on the larger, established companies.

We forced the publication of the Bill in July; the Minister was not prepared to publish it. All companies, large or small, had the summer in which to consult the Government only because we refused to allow the carry-over procedure, and demanded the Bill's publication. Our efforts gave them that opportunity.

Ms Hewitt: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has chosen to reveal discussions that took place through the usual channels. However, as he has done that, I emphasise that we published the draft Bill for consultation because we believed that that was the right way to proceed. We made it clear that we wanted to introduce the Bill; we published it and we have now introduced it.

Mr. Duncan: I mentioned the matter only because it was raised during the Minister's speech. I am puzzled about how the Minister could have published the Bill for consultation if she had already laid it before Parliament. We forced its publication. Interforum, which probably represents the largest group of companies in the sector, stated:

"Although the consultation document is titled 'Promoting Electronic Commerce', some of the provisions in it could actually put the UK at a competitive disadvantage."

At that stage, Interforum said what we were saying:

"We advocate a simple e-commerce Bill containing part II."—

the provision for electronic signature—

"a four-page Bill genuinely designed to help the development of e-commerce in the UK."

It continued:

"Far from promoting the UK as the best place on earth to trade electronically, the Bill is dominated by provisions which will make it more cumbersome to set up services in the UK, rather than elsewhere."

Mr. St. Aubyn: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Government had presented a short Bill in the summer, it would have been relatively easy to have got it on the statute book already?

Mr. Duncan: My hon. Friend is right. If the Government had done as we requested, and presented a short, simple Bill, it could have been close to being enacted by now. However, the Bill that they published for consultation caused many anxieties, especially about the extent of the powers of intrusion, which would have been granted under part III of the draft Bill. Only a few weeks ago, I argued from the Dispatch Box that part III should be removed. The Minister looked across the Chamber and scoffed at me as if to say that that was an absurd demand. However, in my typically tactful fashion, I demanded its removal again. Now, lo and behold, part III has evaporated. The Government accepted the Opposition's sensible, constructive demands. The Minister relented and part III has been removed. We backed business; business backed us; the Minister backed down.

Part I remains a mess. We believe that the industry is best equipped to set standards, and that it can be relied upon to do so. We do not need Government interference in the process.

Part I is confusing and muddled. It is part statutory, part voluntary and, during the Minister's speech, the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) described the absurdity of companies not being compelled to participate, should its provisions be invoked. It is not needed at all. Indeed, the measure, which is part of a Bill for a fast-moving sector of the economy, is designed not to be used. It is designed as a dodo—it will lie on the statute book, extinct. She hopes that she will never have to invoke it, but, even today, has been unable to say under what criteria she might decide to invoke it.

The whole point of part I is that it is bound to be overtaken by events and rendered obsolete by technological advance. At least there is a sunset clause, but I suggest that it would be better to invoke it now and not have part I at all. The Minister will perhaps have seen from her own mailbag—as I certainly have and many other hon. Members will have today—that the Law Society recommends the total removal of part I.

The Bill contains some unsatisfactory elements. There is, lying within it, the prospect of a completely new regulatory office. Will it be called Ofcrypt or Ofweb? Who knows, but provision exists for detaching control of the regulatory regime from the Minister and passing it to some new body designed to regulate the internet. The last thing that the internet needs is an interfering regulator.

Mr. Wyatt: If Britain is to be the fastest-growing e-commerce country, is not it important that consumers feel confident about how we trade on the internet? If there

[Mr. Wyatt]

is to be not a statutory body but a partnership with the internet community, we in the House have to enable that to happen so that consumers can feel confident about using websites. If we do not do that, they will not use them.

Mr. Duncan: No such interference is necessary when there are so many well-established companies connected to the internet that can set their own standards and prove to consumers that they are worth using. The Government do not need to interfere and the partnership to which the hon. Gentleman refers would simply lead to them slowing the development that we want. Indeed, because it has taken them two years to produce the Bill, those companies are already being dragged back in a way that, otherwise, they would not.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me a second time. When he reads what he has said, I wonder whether he will realise that he has proposed a policy that would exclude all new and small companies from using the internet as a way of trading. He is saying that the only firms in which people should have confidence are existing reputable businesses. Surely he cannot seriously be telling us that.

Mr. Duncan: The hon. Gentleman wilfully misunderstands me. Plenty of companies are already established in the industry and they could set up a voluntary regime in which all could participate. The Government do not need to interfere—they would be a brake on progress. Indeed, the whole point of part I—even to the Minister, as she would say—is that it is designed not to be used. I am merely pointing out the absurdity of including a provision that is designed not to be used and, I hope, never will be.

The kernel of the Bill is part II—provision for electronic signature, which is all that the industry needs. It wants to know that there will be a proper legal framework within which a person can contract with another and that the contract will stand up in law. As the Minister rightly said, in many examples a handwritten signature is required—in many cases, it must be witnessed by someone else—but as the world advances it should be possible to achieve such verification and signature electronically. That is what the industry needs, and that is all that it needs, which is why we would have fully supported, even in the previous Session of Parliament, an e-commerce Bill that provided for electronic signature.

Dr. Palmer: As I understand it, the hon. Gentleman believes that, at this stage, we should not provide for a statutory register, no matter how disastrously a voluntary scheme might fare. He admits that we are in a new area. Does he think that past precedents—for instance, on BSE, which was caused by a similar lack of regulation—are encouraging?

Mr. Duncan: The Minister has just said that she is confident that self-regulation will work—so am I. I am pleased to find common ground with her. We could expedite the passage of the Bill if she would base her thinking on the comment that she made, and proceed with the Bill without this unnecessary provision, which will be a brake on progress.

Everyone recognises that part III is a bolt-on extra. Any provision that is retrospective, as the amendment of telecommunications licences would be, gives cause for concern. We reserve judgment on that. What matters is that existing licence holders are not disadvantaged. I am grateful to the Minister for explaining to the House that she will consult more widely and that she intends to remove some parts of the Bill in Committee. We are getting nearer to the four-page Bill that we would like.

A broader issue that affects not only this Bill but others is the language in which it is drafted. Any hon. Member who reads it from cover to cover will see that some parts of it are pretty incomprehensible and unintelligible. It is not an easy Bill to understand. As legislators, many of us would like our style of legislative language to be made simpler.

Mr. White *indicated assent.*

Mr. Duncan: I see that the hon. Gentleman agrees. Legislation in Australia and the United States is in much simpler language. A sentence such as

"the enactments relating to the functions of that body or office shall have effect as if the functions of that body or office included the functions specified in the appointment"

makes us wonder how people reading the Bill will know the rights and wrongs of what they plan to do. I hope that I shall have support from both sides of the House if I join the Campaign for Plain English on the drafting of our law.

There is also concern about the loose and extensive nature of the secondary powers that the Bill grants. Many of them are vague and ill-defined. Some broad and unspecific matters are left to the Minister's whim. We shall consider that in more detail in Committee, but it is a point of principle that the secondary powers granted in the Bill go too far. Bills should be written in simple language. As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) said, it is a matter of principle that hon. Members will want to scrutinise anything that emerges from the Bill, particularly something as significant as whether to introduce a voluntary regime—although it is fair to say that, under the Bill, that matter would have to come before the House in a statutory instrument.

Another area gives cause for concern. I am not saying that we should not proceed until everything is agreed in Europe—quite the opposite. I believe that we should proceed rapidly in the simplest possible form, while keeping more than an eye on what is happening in Europe. I detect an element of confusion in the Government about how they will handle European legislation. I welcome what the Minister said about the nature of the directive, which was that the country of origin of the sale shall be the jurisdiction of the law that will govern the transaction. She also said that there is great pressure in the European Union for a different code to govern internet transactions.

There is much confusion. As the Minister knows from what I said to her in European Standing Committee C, I am concerned that she and her fellow Ministers in the Department of Trade and Industry are saying one thing, but her colleagues in the Lord Chancellor's Department are saying another. We will not tolerate it if a small or even a large company in Britain that sells goods over the internet to another country is suddenly subject to the law of that country unreasonably.

The position becomes all the more confusing when geography becomes less and less significant, because the same person can plug in, wherever he is in the world,

and enter into a contract via his laptop. Where that contract was executed must be clear, and the arrangements must be fair. I am glad that the Minister is going to press for the European Union recital to be dropped, and I hope that she will report to the House when she has been successful.

Our position is straightforward: we want a short, simple Bill. We do not believe that part I should be in the Bill. We believe that part II is the kernel of the Bill, and is essentially all that is needed. We believe that part III must be watched very closely, and we will ensure that there is no unfairness among existing telecommunications licence holders. If the Minister prunes the Bill and prunes it sensibly, making it a short, sharp, effective measure for the benefit of those who want to trade electronically, we will support her; but if she introduces other burdens that prove to be a drag anchor on such progress, we will oppose her.

5.41 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): In my brief intervention on the speech of the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), what I was trying to say about IR35 was that anyone with an ounce of technological know-how would have worked out how to generate that kind of signature response in a few days. If the Conservative party had not got that far in its use of technology, woe betide it. All the names have been in the public domain for several months, following a web campaign on the subject. I agreed with the hon. Gentleman on one point, to which I shall return later.

The language in which the Bill is drafted reflects a broader weakness in the way we conduct our legislative arrangements in spheres in which technology is driving our thought processes.

For the benefit of hon. Members who have not yet experienced the web, let me illustrate just how powerful the tool might be. Last night, when reading the paperwork relating to the Bill, I thought that it might be fun to pick a name at random from the list of Opposition Members to demonstrate the power of the web in accessing information. It took me a few minutes. There was a list under "A"; I used an old piece of technology, the pin, which identified the word "Aldershot". I then looked at the web connections relating to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth). I have put a note to the hon. Gentleman on the board, telling him that I was going to raise this.

The local website for the hon. Gentleman's council—a very good website: www.hart.gov.uk—tells us that the local MP has joined a

"War on Waste with a pledge to compost his garden waste at home."

There are instant connections, not from there but through a search list under the hon. Gentleman's name. The website of The Freedom Association, of whose council the hon. Gentleman is a member, is www.tfa.net, and that linked me, via a number of extraordinary areas, to a site that is partly in the public domain and partly an e-commerce site. It showed, at the heart of the search for that one name, a company called Astra Holdings.

Those of us who have been in the House for some time will remember all those areas, but the exercise showed the power of this research tool. It can link areas of work that we have never been able to link by any other means.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton started his speech in a way that we all find ourselves forced to do in the context of the web. We see asymptotic curves, talking about billions of dollars of potential commerce, processing power, or take-up of the web. All that may be a little hackneyed, but it is true. The problem that we face is legislating on something that is moving so rapidly. No hon. Member can do more than guess at the scale of the growth of e-commerce over the next 10 years. The phenomenon equally applies in other areas of scientific and technical evolution. In my short time here since 1992, those developments have included digital broadcasting—I served on the Bill that provided the framework for that—and human genetics, on which the Select Committee on Science and Technology, of which I used to be a member, worked. Like the information technology revolution, such developments are moving so fast as to render legislation potentially out of date before, with the greatest respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), the ink is dry on the vellum.

In the case of e-commerce, the Government have tried to use the collective wisdom of the nation by publishing a draft Bill, a procedure that the House should use more often. In sectors such as electronic communications, I commend to the House the use of witness examination at the Committee stage, so that, at the point of coming to detailed decisions, we are as up to date as possible about the technologies that impact on us. That will not solve the problem of keeping up to date, but it will at least give us an opportunity to be up to date on Third Reading.

I recommend that the Government avoid something that happened in several sectors under the previous Administration. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton referred to procurement processes. The biggest weakness in those procurements was that they were technology-based, rather than designed to provide solutions. When looking at technologies, we need to use the best brains both in industry and in academia to deal with the impact of generic technological evolutions, rather than to focus on particular boxes.

To a certain extent, the Bill achieves that. I congratulate Ministers on their foresight and on the way in which they have addressed some of the difficult problems, but I make some observations on what is not in the Bill, rather than what is. I shall not stray too far because I know that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would want me to concentrate on the content of the Bill.

It is clear that we will have to come back to some of these issues, but it will be at the expense of Great Britain plc if we are not careful and do not get things right first time. Just remember those asymptotic curves that I mentioned earlier—the Bill is about how fast we will get to the near vertical slope predicted. If we get it wrong, who knows what disadvantage we will create for businesses in the United Kingdom.

The next point is specifically targeted at the little Englanders among Conservative Members. Without international agreements and partnerships, we might as well pack up now. The growth of e-commerce will be more important at the next GATT and World Trade Organisation discussions than the price of Canadian wheat ever was. Perhaps that is not a profound statement today, but few hon. Members accepted it when I made that prediction five years ago.

[Mr. Andrew Miller]

Essentially, the main principles of such international agreements should be no different from those on which all trade works: trust. All good trade works on the basis of that. If the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton and I decided to enter into an agreement with each other, I suspect that the degree of trust would be limited. I would want to see his goods; he would want to see my money. As trade develops, trust is increasingly built into the relationships. We currently use intermediary vehicles such as credit cards to help us establish those processes. We need to make it possible for electronic signatures to be used for verification. The nations that move furthest and fastest on that will be in a position to succeed.

Ideally, the codes to provide vehicles for trust should be established on a voluntary basis, but if that fails they will have to be statutory. The relationships involved will be a 21st century mail order protection scheme. We need to establish that principle worldwide. Hallmarks such as TrustUK, which my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce mentioned, will give the individual or trade consumer confidence that their goods will be delivered on time and at the agreed price and quality and will give the supplier confidence that the money will arrive on time, to the correct value and in the right currency. Nation states have an interesting role to play. The complex question of taxation has been mentioned and needs to be considered carefully.

Self-regulation can work and I believe from my discussions with industry that the will exists to deliver it.

Part I of the Bill deals with cryptography. The Government were right to rule out a mandatory key escrow, not least because it is the most unintelligible phrase ever to appear in the House. I suspect that very few people here, let alone outside the House, could explain what it meant. I hope that the Conservatives will look a little beyond the horizons of the green Benches to consider the interests of Great Britain plc and will support the principle that we have adopted. We need to send out a gentle warning to all our industrial partners. It would clearly be improper for any company that is a provider at any level to stand in the way of the legitimate needs of the police and criminal investigation authorities. Such companies should remember that their shareholders have children who are targets of paedophiles and drug barons. Of course industry should try to remain on the leading edge, and we want to help in that, but companies should not forget their responsibilities.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I sympathise with what the hon. Gentleman says about responsible cryptography providers co-operating with law enforcement agencies, but I hope that he is not suggesting that part I is about law enforcement. My understanding is that nothing in part I should be related to law enforcement, because those issues are to be dealt with in another Bill.

Mr. Miller: I am referring to the context of the Bill as a whole. I take the hon. Gentleman's specific point, but in the general picture, while we give British companies and players in the field the advantages of being on the leading edge, we must send out a gentle warning that their shareholders also have children who are targets of those to whom I referred.

Criminals will continue to exploit the net. I gave away some web addresses earlier, but there are others that I am not going to specify. I did a search a few years ago in the wake of the awful Oklahoma bomb, when it was suggested that white supremacists were involved. Some of the information that I uncovered in the public domain on the web was outrageous. I do not think that any Member of Parliament would associate himself with some of the views that I unearthed. It is up to society as a whole to decide where the line is drawn and it is up to all of us in the House and outside to bring to book those who cross it.

Mr. Ian Taylor: There is too much confusion about the key escrow system, which is often associated only with the problems of the Home Office trying to track criminals. Key escrow, public-private key infrastructures and the use of asymmetric cyphers are all valuable tools for industry for purely commercial reasons. When I introduced a mandatory key escrow system, there was a lot of industrial support for it. Time has gone on and I have already recanted—I do not have to keep doing it. However, we should not talk about criminality every time that key escrow is mentioned. We also have to understand the serious commercial interests involved.

Mr. Miller: I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman's judgment on many of these issues.

Mr. Wyatt: He should come and join us.

Mr. Miller: There are several issues on which the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) should come and join us, not the least of which is Europe. I take his point that we should not automatically link key escrow simply with issues of criminality. There are broader issues involved. His point is well made.

Part II deals with electronic signatures. I am not a million miles adrift from the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton—for once—in seeking an assurance that the nature of the signature required by any parties to a contract will be driven by the needs of the parties, not simply by the needs of the state. The state clearly has a legitimate role through its various agencies, but just as parties to any civil contract have arrangements that are acceptable to them in pen and ink—or whatever other vehicle they use; perhaps a shake of hands—the state should not seek to interfere in the process, but should aid it by helping to set standards and directing people to where such standards can be found.

The reasoned amendment says that we should decline to give the Bill a Second Reading

"because it introduces a completely unnecessary element of regulation in the supervision of electronic commerce which will damage the United Kingdom's lead in this field".

The only aspect of that on which I agree with the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton is that the United Kingdom has a lead in the field. We have that lead because the Government's general policy has helped to build a framework that assists such development. That is adequately recognised in several large company responses to the proposals. Dell—a company that I hold in high regard—says in its submission:

"Dell welcomes the Government's decision to move away from the use of key escrow and third party key holding.

Dell supports efforts to establish a self-regulating, non-statutory accreditation scheme for Trust Service Providers.

Dell welcomes the removal of the proposal for a rebuttable presumption of validity for electronic signatures.

Dell proposes that electronic signatures should be recognised as completely satisfying the requirements of UK statutory law, which have been traditionally fulfilled through the mediums of paper and writing."

That is not dissimilar to the points I just made.

I referred earlier to Microsoft and the letter I received from David Svendsen, the chairman of Microsoft in the UK, in which he set out a number of bullet points. He

"strongly supports the Bill's prohibition on the imposition of key escrow by Government Ministers . . . strongly supports the Bill's granting of legal recognition and admissibility to all electronic signatures . . . believes that the Bill's approach to allowing electronic fulfilment of written and paper requirements in UK law needs to be strengthened".

Again, that touches on a point that I made. Mr. Svendsen

"supports the Government taking powers to establish a voluntary approvals scheme for cryptography service providers."

Finally, he congratulated the Government on

"introducing legislation that will serve as a model for Europe".

That was from the largest IT company in the world—indeed, probably the largest company in the world.

Mr. Allan: At the moment.

Mr. Miller: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is thinking of my next sheaf of papers, which is from amazon.com.uk. He may have an insight that I do not have. However, similar notes of accord have been coming in the post over the past few days.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton would have been right had we been debating the Bill as originally proposed, as some of his points were those raised by industry at that time. It is a pity that the hon. Gentleman did not catch up by recognising that the Government have moved positively in partnership with business, commerce and industry—not just in the UK, but worldwide.

I welcome the Bill, and I hope that my minor observations can be debated in Committee. I hope that we get the Bill rapidly on to the statute book to ensure that Britain remains a lead player in this important area of business and commerce.

6.3 pm

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): At last—this is the most elephantine pregnancy ever. In the dim and distant past, I was the Minister who started on this process in 1995. Now we have the Bill, and the Home Office has been seen off, thankfully. I congratulate the Minister on achieving something that I did not achieve. To put that into context, I had an achievement in terms of the Internet Watch Foundation. That was a self-regulatory body, created when the Home Office was ready to pounce in the absurd legislative way that only it knows.

I would like the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce to pass on my congratulations to her officials, many of whom were full of enthusiasm in 1995. I hope that they still are, although I am less than sure. Nevertheless, they have done a remarkable job in seeing the Bill through its various periods of gestation.

I declare the interests which are in the register. From time to time, I am asked to advise companies, and I am a director of one or two technology companies. If it is thought that the benefits to the UK that the Bill will bring will also benefit them, I will be delighted to have declared my interest in that context.

It is difficult to remember the atmosphere when we proposed the ideas of key escrow and trusted third parties. I came across a delicious quotation from Janet Street-Porter, now the editor of *The Independent on Sunday*—bless her heart. Back in those days of 1996, she said:

"Forget the superhighway, get a life. The future isn't wired. In fact historians will look back on the 1990s and the current surge of techno-hype and net-euphoria as a bizarre blip, a meaningless cul-de-sac in the cultural story of the 20th century."

That will not make me rush out to buy *The Independent on Sunday*. Nevertheless, somebody has to be that wrong.

Mr. Miller: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the problem that he had in the previous Administration was that that was precisely the view of that Administration?

Mr. Taylor: The House, as always, was full of wisdom on those occasions—it just did not happen to understand what I was saying. That was the problem.

It might have been a good job that the House did not understand. Since then, the National Security Agency in the United States has genuinely become a hate figure. In 1998, the plot of a film called "Enemy of the State" revolved entirely around the NSA murdering a politician who was trying to bring in a Bill with powerful encryption. I hope that no one gets that sort of encouragement, because we cannot afford to lose any politicians from the Conservative Benches—we have few enough as it is.

In principle, I welcome the Bill. It is difficult for a Government, and the Minister should be humble in one respect. The rate of progress since 1997 has not been as fast as many of us would have liked. In addition, it is dangerous for a Prime Minister to put so much emphasis on the importance of an e-envoy, only to find that the e-envoy does not take up his post for about 18 months. In fact, the e-envoy will not start until 1 January.

There is a problem in translating the fine words used by the Prime Minister and across Government into effective implementation—that is what the industry is looking for. In that context, I hope that the Minister will indicate when the 60 recommendations of the "e-commerce@its.best.uk" report, from the pen of Jim Norton and his committee, are to be put in place. What is the action plan for that? In many cases, they are ahead of what we think the Government's plans are. That is important, particularly in terms of education. The Department for Education and Employment still talks as if it has not read the report.

I hope that the Minister will use her undoubted charm, but also steel, to make sure that other Departments understand what is going on. I shall give her a tip in a spirit of co-operation—she should use powers which are trans-departmental to make an impact on the Government's understanding of e-commerce. I had those powers in the scientific sense, as Science Minister, and I arrogated to myself the powers in the technology sense. She must do the same if she is to be effective, and if any of the report's action plans are to be put in place. Somebody has to browbeat other Government Departments and Secretaries of State to apply them.

[Mr. Taylor]

There is still a degree of confusion, which is not clarified by the Bill, about whether internet service providers are common carriers or are to be more responsible for the content that they carry. It is a complex matter, and I know only too well that there has been much thought about it. However, I would be grateful if the Minister would remove the uncertainty. She should continue, with Oftel, to look at the problem of unmetered calls. I will try to clarify this point. If I do so wrongly, I am sure that the Minister will assist the House by pointing out why.

The difficulty with unmetered calls is not the willingness of companies—although one should watch BT carefully, because if it were to introduce very low-price or even free calls that were in a sense subsidised by its other activities, it would be eliminating competition rather than spurring it on—but the need to protect poorer people, who would by definition probably face higher than normal subscriptions.

The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) over-emphatically attacked BT, which was unfair, but he missed the point that unmetered calls are often attached to a service with a monthly or quarterly subscription. The consistent policy of this Government and the previous Government has been to try to ensure that the subscriptions are kept low, because of the problems of poor people. The clash between the subscription levels and the unmetered calls is one of the obstacles that Oftel is still wrestling with. It is a pretty intractable issue.

Ms Hewitt: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. It is precisely for that reason that we do not want a single pricing model—nobody with any sense wants that—that would require low-income low users to pay very high subscription charges. It is perfectly possible to have a range of tariff models, as we already have for mobile telephony, to enable low-price or unmetered internet access calls, especially at peak times.

Mr. Taylor: I endorse that point. The competitive market—the result of the Conservative Government's policies—enabled that to happen.

I want to be naughty to the extent of saying that I believe that the Secretary of State's recent referral of the Cable and Wireless-NTL deal was a mistake. It broke the pattern of encouraging substantial competitors to grow in the marketplace. Growth in the cable industry has been based on an aggregation of franchises. The reference gave the wrong signal to the market. We want more competition, not less.

Mr. Wyatt: On access to the internet for poorer communities and families, does the hon. Gentleman agree that a good precedent was set when we took £3 million from television licence receipts to subsidise the creation of the Open university?

Mr. Taylor: There is a huge opportunity to be innovative. The hon. Gentleman is one of the more innovative Government Members. Perhaps one day Oftel will take the Independent Television Commission within its bosom and we will get a more rational debate.

Others have emphasised the importance of the on-line world. The figures are hard to verify and can be approximate, but we know that there are about 11 million internet users in the United Kingdom, with 11,000 joining each day. Many more people have access to the net, at work, home or school—about 18.6 million is 40 per cent. of the population. The critical mass is already with us. The rate of growth is astronomical.

Andersen Consulting's figures show that the value of the European internet market could be $430 billion by 2003, with 170 million users, as against $19 billion this year. That represents a growth in the European market from less than 20 per cent. of the size of the United States market this year to 60 per cent. by 2003, which shows how dynamic the European single market is.

There is further expansion because the internet is not a personal computer monopoly. Digital television is moving ahead dramatically, and most exciting of all are the wireless applications and the delivery of messages to mobiles. They are slightly taut messages in stretched second-generation digital but on third-generation mobile we will get the full multimedia impact.

Someone asked what we were doing in the dark, distant days before history began—meaning the previous Government. We were preparing the auctions that the Minister is about to launch. The auction arrangements were already thought through by the Conservative Government, but the trouble with the processes of government is that they move so jolly slowly. They had to move more slowly than we would have liked because of the need to get international agreements on what are known as the UMTS arrangements, so that the system, when it came, could be truly global.

Mr. White: The hon. Gentleman made such proposals in government but Opposition Front Benchers are now vehemently against them, which shows how far out of touch they are.

Mr. Taylor: The Opposition's job is always to oppose, whatever the justification. I am not on the Opposition Front Bench, for reasons that we will not go into.

It is important to understand what the Minister thinks she is signing up to in the e-commerce directive—which is based on host-country legislation, as she rightly said—because I understand from a senior member of Directorate-General XV that there are some specific caveats, for example concerning moves by any country to protect its consumers that are justified by public policy or public security. They are pretty big caveats. I hope that we will get some clarification before we sign up because one can drive a coach and horses through home-country control with such caveats in place.

I pressed on the Minister the need to have a trans-departmental authority. She should ensure that home-country control under European directives also applies to the Financial Services and Markets Bill, clause 19 of which creates concerns about the powers taken to regulate internet sites outside the United Kingdom. The conflict needs to be reconciled. There is no doubt that the financial services market is becoming global. I am glad to say that both the Corporation of London and the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists welcome the Bill and are determined to ensure that London plays its full part. We must be careful to base both British and European legislation on sound principles that encourage e-commerce rather than restraining it.

The alarming skills shortage both in the United Kingdom and in the European Union as a whole could hold back many of our good efforts to stimulate the growth of e-commerce.

The Government should show leadership. It is no good for the Prime Minister to say—correctly—that companies that are not entirely on-line in five years' time may well be out of business, when the Government's own target for providing their services on-line is only 50 per cent. by 2005. Is the logical extension that the Government themselves will be out of business by 2005? I doubt that they are saying that, but that is the logic of the situation. There is no excuse for not pushing ahead more quickly.

Mr. Miller: The hon. Gentleman must distinguish between businesses that need to be at the leading edge and Governments who have to provide services to consumers who currently have limited access. There is a chicken-and-egg argument there, and clearly the Government needs to take action to encourage the growth of access, but it would be improper for them to seek to deliver all their services on-line if all our citizens are not fully wired.

Mr. Taylor: That is an admirable but not very powerful contribution. The reality is that the Government have to act as a catalyst. The dates set are too lax and the targets set are not realistic. It is as if a large company were to announce that within a year no member of its supply chain would be accepted unless it were capable of dealing on-line in all aspects of its business. Those companies affected get on-line if they want to stay part of the supply chain. Perhaps the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) should talk to the Minister about innovative ways in which public-private partnerships can finance moving to on-line status.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Minister have reassured me about the risk that the regulation of investigatory powers legislation that is proposed would undermine what the Department of Trade and Industry is trying to do with this Bill. I take the Minister's word that it will not, and I am more relaxed on the subject.

I also welcome the sunset clause in part I, although I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) that part I is an intrusive element in the Bill. Given that it is included, I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure the House that there will be a proper discussion if the powers that she has retained are ever to be triggered. If so, we can accept the clause in the interests of speed, although my hon. Friend will make a shrewd, tactical judgment on how to progress it through Committee. I do not intend to serve alongside him, because he will do it so well without me.

In part III, I welcome the explicit restriction on key escrow, which is well put. It is hidden away in part III, but at least it is there and it is a key development. Natural concerns arise about whether the Alliance for Electronic Business scheme will be acceptable, but it is the only one being discussed. The more that the Minister can do to review her latest proposals and then give comfort, the better. Certainly, I know that industry is waiting for formal announcements in support.

The Minister should not ignore my intervention in her speech. I say that because I am not sure that she fully took the point. If the Government introduce their scheme with the private sector, whether business or consumers, as a key escrow system, it may become the de facto standard for others to follow. It is best to be sure that the Government understand what influence they would have on the shape of the market if it were to adopt the wrong approach.

The biggest criticism of the Bill is that it focuses on cryptography. The process of encryption is important, including signatures—I do not underestimate their importance in getting the process going—but there are many other confidence-building measures that can be taken. Some of those 60 points in the earlier report I mentioned should have been slotted in during the consultation period—perhaps when no one was watching—and there would then have been huge excitement when the Bill was introduced, because it would have seemed to encourage electronic business more generally.

If the Government can be consistent about electronic signatures, I hope that we will see dramatic, exciting progress. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton will criticise the lack of other legal changes. I mentioned the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise, because I know that they are working on the issue—that is what worries me. I am interested in the basis on which those organisations are working, because I do not want the Minister to be thrilled to have got the Bill through only to find that the Treasury announces that her system is incompatible with its system. That would not be the first time that had happened.

No time scale is given for the co-ordination of technical solutions for some of the other Government changes. There is also a lack of visibility for Government changes. I hope that the Minister will talk to other Ministers in her Department about the impact of the Bill on international trade agreements, for example, and whether they will be brought on-line in conformity with the Bill.

We also need urgent guidance, although I am not qualified to make comments on it, on how the courts will interpret some of the provisions in the Bill. What will constitute an acceptable signature for the courts? That will have be tested, but the issues include whether a certificate or identity is binding, the reliability of signature processes and technology, and the intent or possession—instead of relying on technical solutions alone. Those are complex issues and I hope that the Minister will at some stage assure the House that she has a grip on them. When the electronic signatures come to be tested in the courts, we do not want to find that the Minister's work is undermined.

Confidence is not just about encryption, but it helps enormously with verification of the identity of the people with whom one is dealing. Encryption can enable transactions to take place on the net in circumstances in which people do not know each other's identity and need some reassurance and verification. Certificates will be increasingly issued to identify people, but confidence and security can be given in other ways. Firewalls have been the normal way to protect information, but secure networks will be the way forward. The Government need to consider other methods of reinforcement that they can use when dealing with the consumer—we used to call it Government direct, but I cannot remember what phrase this Government uses for it. Will the Government use smart cards? I warn the Minister, if she is as keen on smart cards as I was, she will have the same battles with

[Mr. Taylor]

the Home Office that I had. In my day, the Home Office seemed to think that smart cards are identity cards and a terrible threat to civil liberties, which is of course nonsense.

I welcome the Bill. It will provide a Government framework for a self-regulatory prospect, but I warn the Minister to be careful in building confidence. We should not rely on the back-up powers. The Bill will underpin the admissibility of electronic information and I hope that the Minister will clarify the commercial law in other areas across Government. I hope that she will also ensure that the Government adopt the Bill as soon as possible after it hits the statute book. In conjunction with my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton, I hope that it hits the statute book in fine form, without any of its frills, as soon as possible.

6.28 pm

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): I had intended to start my contribution with an attack on Tory Front Benchers but, before I do so, I wish to exempt the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor). I agreed almost entirely with his comments, most of which were sensible and constructive.

Dr. Ladyman: That is why he is not on the Tory Front Bench.

Mr. White: There may be one or two reasons for that. It is interesting to contrast the consultation on this Bill with the record of the previous Government, because one or two points stand out. I remember working in the IT industry when the previous Government did not have an IT strategy. Their approach was very laissez-faire. I welcome this Government's IT strategy, which will build on what small businesses and the IT industry are doing and are good at.

The issue of key escrow has already been raised, so I shall not go into it. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) mentioned IT failures, but I suggest that he considers the record of the previous Government and their decisions. The civil service used to be one of the best training grounds in the country for programmers and analysts. The previous Government's decision to bring in outside contractors and sell off parts of the civil service caused a lot of people to leave. We lost a whole generation of analysts and programmers in the mid-1980s; they went abroad because of the detrimental actions of the then Government. The Conservative party would do well to remember that many of the people who went abroad helped with the development of the internet in silicon valley.

The previous Government also created local monopolies with cable companies, which are causing some of the infrastructure problems. British Telecom used to be the cable company in Milton Keynes, which is a growing new city. BT laid the cable into the new parts of the city, but would not touch the older areas. Many households did not get cable because they were in the poorer, older areas. Because of its local monopoly, BT had no competition. The creation of local monopolies goes completely against the ethos of competition.

When BT was privatised, the Tory emphasis on ownership, rather than liberalisation, of the market—which is still apparent in some of the comments of Conservative Members tonight—distorted the argument. It should be about how to create a marketplace and the conditions for competition, not about who owns a business. However, the Tories have adopted that approach time and again, and they are making the same mistake tonight with this Bill.

Mr. Allan: Does the hon. Gentleman think that it would be helpful, in creating a better marketplace, for there to be competition over the single piece of copper that still goes into most households, by splitting off the local loop? Does he see that as the best way of generating unmetered calls and all the packages that we want?

Mr. White: It is not the only way, but I would not object to it.

I find it distressing that e-commerce is referred to as something new, which suddenly appeared out of a vacuum, with no history. Electronic commerce is not just the internet. Britain leads the world in electronic data interchange. We were responsible for a range of electronic innovations that are used when people make credit or debit card transactions over the phone. We must remember that, and learn from it. I ask the Minister to consider how the credit card industry started, and the ways in which credit cards have come to dominate the market. Although the industry's speed of change over the past 20 or 30 years is different from that of the net, there are similarities in market regulation and the way in which electronic communication has facilitated the interaction between shopkeepers and banks. The two industries are not exactly the same, but there are a number of similarities to build on.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton raised an important point. The internet is not one thing, nor will it become one thing—it will be a range of technologies, linked to the web. Intranets and secure market places, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, will become increasingly important. They have different regulatory requirements from consumers interacting with an open system. There are very important considerations when it comes to secondary legislation.

The growth of call centres raises a number of issues. The Competition Commission is carrying out an investigation into the ice cream industry. Walls Direct is in my constituency, and I shall not use this debate to argue the rights and wrongs of such an investigation, but it has a direct effect on how e-commerce can develop or be retarded. It is important that regulatory bodies such as the Office of Fair Trading and the Competition Commission—I am not including Oftel—recognise the impact that their decisions have on electronic commerce and on what we are doing in making Britain a leader in electronic commerce.

With electronic commerce, we are talking about a global economy, not simply about Britain and the European Union. Decisions made by regulatory bodies in France and other countries, particularly the United States, have an impact on us. It is critical that we get the international agreements right.

The Competition Commission needs to consider new entrants as well as existing players. One problem with electronic commerce is that many of the key players are new entrants to the market—they did not exist when consultation took place in March, and that illustrates the speed of change.

My local newspaper runs a forum on its web page, to which anyone can contribute on the subject of their choice. I go through it regularly to respond to constituents on local issues. Somebody contributed an e-mail item about a court case and a paedophile. The item was withdrawn from the forum because it was considered libellous. A newspaper could have gone to its solicitors and published the article or not, depending on the solicitor's advice, but, because the item was transmitted instantaneously, with some people seeing it and responding, there was an argument about the legal definitions of when an internet service provider can withdraw such items. That example, although not about commerce, illustrates the change that has occurred, in that electronic commerce is instantaneous, and there is not necessarily time to obtain the legal advice, as there would traditionally have been.

This is a useful Bill, and I welcome it. Unlike the hon. Member for Esher and Walton, I think that part I is important, for one simple reason. Although I hope that it is not used, and agree that it should not be, its inclusion gives the industry the impetus to create a voluntary system. The hon. Gentleman talked about the internet watch foundation—an excellent example of what should have happened and will, I am sure, happen. I hope that, when five years are up, the sunset clause will be implemented.

One of my concerns about part I, however, relates to fees, whether charged on a voluntary or statutory basis. We must learn from our experience with the Food Standards Agency fees. One standard fee leads to problems for small businesses, while a sliding scale leads to questions of fairness. Why should larger companies pay massive sums to subsidise smaller ones? I do not have an answer, but we must get the issue right.

It is important to have a problem-solving mechanism in the voluntary system, as it evolves, so that the Government and the industry can resolve any concerns. One of the worst things that the Government could say is, "We have a problem. That is the end of the scheme, and we will implement part I." The Government should include problem resolution in their dialogue with the industry, and I am sure that they will.

Part I will have an impact on other consumer legislation. We must ensure that that legislation outlined in "Modern markets: confident consumers"—the Government's consumer White Paper—is compatible with part I and does not unintentionally implement it through the back door ahead of time or undermine what we are trying to do in agreements with the industry. Part I will give the industry a spur towards achieving a voluntary system, and allow it to do so in a flexible manner. What is right now may not be right in three or five years. The scheme must be allowed to evolve to accommodate changing technology.

It was interesting to compare part II with the Irish and Canadian examples. I think that the Government have got it about right. About five years ago, I wanted to introduce a scheme to replace all the mortgage deeds held by the company for which I worked, as they took up miles of corridor space. However, the lawyers told me that that was impossible, as each deed had to be written on a piece of paper bearing a seal. It is of critical importance to recognise that the problem goes beyond electronic signatures and includes the sealing of deeds. We must ensure that the electronic equivalents of deeds and seals are included in the provisions. I am therefore especially pleased with part II.

However, the Bill will permit individual Government Departments to operate at different speeds. I am worried that not every Minister will share my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for the Bill, and that some—especially if, God forbid, we get another Conservative Government—may not want to adopt its provisions. Therefore, I urge my hon. Friend to set a timetable and to encourage other Ministers to adhere to it.

When they were set, I considered that the targets for attaining electronic government were right. However, although it has been argued that key escrow was a valid consideration in 1996, we have now moved beyond that point. The time has come to review those targets and to consider whether they are still appropriate, given the changes in technology since they were adopted.

I congratulate the Government on the inclusion in the latest ministerial handbook of every Minister's e-mail address. I am delighted at that, as I hate writing letters and e-mails are much easier.

I am pleased that the old part III has been removed, and I welcome clause 13, which is excellent. I was worried that it applied only to part I, but I was reassured on that point—and delighted as a result—by what my hon. Friend the Minister said earlier.

When I intervened on my hon. Friend the Minister, I mentioned Oftel. The old saying is that anyone not part of the solution is part of the problem, and I continue to regard Oftel as part of the problem. Oftel will investigate complaints about any telecommunications company, but the process could take two to four internet years—about six to 12 months. Even when a solution is reached, it will not necessarily be implemented. The process takes far too long.

Oftel is also guilty of considering only the current state of the competitive market. It does not take into account the future and what we are trying to achieve. Do Oftel's decisions encourage or discourage e-commerce? I believe that it has a duty to encourage it.

Oftel says that it does not need more powers to encourage e-commerce. I disagree: however, if it really does not need new powers, it should make more use of the ones that it already has.

I understand that France Telecom in Paris has introduced an asynchronous digital subscriber loop system for £25 a month. That system is available now. BT has suggested that its system, which will be available at some unspecified future date, will cost about £60 a month. I am worried that we are slipping behind in that respect. The magazine *CommunicationsWeek International* stated:

"At first sight, the UK will have the most expensive DSL system in the world."

Last week's decision by BT gets one cheer from me. Oftel must take seriously the question of the local loop, and offer proposals. BT staff say that they are happy to accommodate Oftel's decisions and to deliver on them, but Oftel must take the lead and take a long-term view about where the competitive market is headed. There is a temptation for BT to decide to delay the introduction of ADSL because the lease line system is very profitable. I hope that the company does not give in to that temptation, and that it introduces ADSL as soon as possible.

[Mr. White]

The new part III requires a confident regulator with modern powers. Although the changes to part III are welcome and right, we need Oftel to go further.

The warning has been given before that e-commerce might create information haves and have-nots. Much talk has been devoted to ways in which that problem might be avoided or rectified, but the key lies in the interaction between Government and industry on the one hand, and voluntary groups and local communities—both geographical and in terms of shared interests—on the other.

Many information technology pilot schemes are under way around the country, and the one in Lewisham is the most famous example. However, they do not cover the whole country. One of the biggest challenges facing the Government is to translate successful pilot schemes into schemes that offer something to everyone.

Mr. Allan: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is critically important to get electronic banking right? Given that the world of e-commerce is based on credit and credit cards, many of the people about whom the hon. Gentleman is talking will be excluded.

Mr. White: The hon. Gentleman anticipates my next point. The growth of institutions such as E.Bank, First Bank, Egg and others is an important step forward, which I welcome. That development will transform the way in which the internet is used, just as direct marketing via telephone lines did three or four years ago. An important development is taking place, and the Government should facilitate investment in the new companies coming on line.

I mentioned the Competition Commission earlier, and a regulatory framework needs to be put in place for e-commerce. The financial markets and the Treasury must recognise that they need to facilitate e-commerce. The Bill is therefore extremely important, but it could fail if other bodies put obstacles in its way. The Government must have a joined-up approach. I welcome the fact that we have an e-Minister, and an e-envoy who knows his way around the civil service, but we must not allow the problems that I have outlined to take root. It is encouraging that the Government recognise the danger, but they must also deliver when it comes to avoiding it.

I am also made uneasy by the innovations that are taking place. We talk about electronic communications, but there is no guarantee that innovations will be confined to that field. For example, although I am not sure that the solid state transference systems already operating in laboratories are covered by the Bill, the Government need to be aware of the issues that such innovation raises.

If I can agree with the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton about anything, it is with his comments about language. I wholeheartedly endorse what he said about the need for our legislation to be written in plain and non-sexist language. This Bill is one of the better examples of the use of non-sexist language, but it still refers unnecessarily often to "him", "he", "it", and so on. Such references are not needed, and I plead with the parliamentary draftsmen to recognise that we are not living in the 18th century.

Mr. Baldry: Does the hon. Gentleman realise that, under the provisions of the Interpretation Act 1978, which date back almost 100 years, any Act of Parliament allows us to construes the word "she" whenever "he" is used? It is a totally neutral word.

Mr. White: I accept that there is such an Act, but not that that position is valid. If business, local authorities and most people outside can use non-sexist language as a norm, there is no reason why this place cannot.

I support this much-needed Bill. The changes that it makes will benefit this country, but other changes in respect of infrastructure and of obstacles in government and business must also be tackled.

I congratulate the Government on listening to industry. Industry said that it did not believe that the original provisions were right and asked for change. The Government listened and changed the Bill. That is a foundation for success.

I also congratulate the Government on securing a double whammy by helping British business while exposing the divisions among the Tories and their hatred of the European Union. One has only to mention Europe and they find a reason to vote against things. Opposing the Bill, as the Tories want us to tonight, would damage the United Kingdom's lead on e-commerce. I congratulate the Government on resisting that, and on the Bill.

6.51 pm

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): Unfortunately, owing to a prior engagement, for which I could find no substitute, I shall have to leave before the end of the debate. I have notified Madam Speaker and the Minister.

I have a small business, although it is not particularly an electronic communication business. My interest is that, like many businesses, we hope increasingly to use such means.

I know that the Government attach particular importance to the Bill because Her Majesty has announced it twice. I congratulate the Department of Trade and Industry to the extent that, over time, it listened to very real criticisms. The Bill has shrunk and shrunk, for which many of us are grateful. We are particularly glad that the Department has excised part III of the draft Bill, which had no place in trade and industry legislation. It would have been better suited to the Home Office.

The final Bill is slim, but I regret that I must still question the relevance of some of its remaining limbs. Its ultimate aim is to facilitate the growth of e-commerce. The DTI's press release states that the Bill is designed

"to develop the UK as the best environment world-wide in which to trade electronically."

Liberal Democrats support that because electronic efficiency will increase overall wealth by raising economic efficiency.

I am sure that the Minister agrees that it is important that traders recognise that the internet offers a new system of trading. Conventional trading techniques cannot simply be translated into cyberspace. I said that I have my own business. Many colleagues would expect me to say that I have an established web presence and that everything is up and running, but that is not the case. Instead, having, I hope, amended our computer systems to ensure that they will not be hit by the millennium bug, we are carefully re-examining our sales strategy and products in conjunction with a marketing company. We will soon be looking to market our

products through e-commerce. It is important that business does not think that e-commerce is the answer, that one can simply slap something on a page and that is the end of it. The matter must be considered. I hope that the forthcoming Small Business Service will help to facilitate matters, especially for the small business community.

I well remember that when I was first elected to the House I was one of those who spoke about the millennium bug. I will not embarrass anyone, but a question on the subject was referred to the Minister responsible for the millennium dome. While there may be problems with the dome, that was not the force of the question. I take my hat off to the many hon. Members who know a lot about the subject, but many colleagues clearly knew nothing about it two and a half years ago. That extended to Ministers. It is important to educate people about electronic commerce.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) is leaving. He rightly expressed concern about the cost of transmission. The Minister referred to the number of different options with, for example, mobile phones and suggested that that could be a way forward. I accept that, but the choice of systems is wide and it is not always easy to choose the most relevant, cheap and applicable one.

This morning I visited Meadvale primary school in my constituency, where I learned something that is relevant to the debate. I saw for the first time a system whereby the lesson—in this case a geography lesson—was projected straight from a computer on to the wall. The system is quite expensive, but the school was able to employ it through special funding. Children could see the whole globe on the screen. It could be adjusted to show the country concerned. My point is that this is another means by which we should be able to communicate sales or other messages within companies or to other companies.

I will concentrate on the Bill's two substantive sections: the setting up of the approved cryptography provider register and the legal status of electronic signatures. I am not sure that the section on approved cryptography providers could not have been dropped altogether. That is the opinion of the Law Society. The case for such a register has not been convincingly made. The market is developing fast. Lack of confidence in cryptographic efficiency is not a significant barrier to trade.

Mr. Allan: Does my hon. Friend share my experience of common information technology standards? Their great joy is that there are so many from which to choose. Is he worried that the cryptography service may fall into the same trap as other Government-promoted standards such as those for networks, whereby the Government produce a scheme that industry rejects because it has moved on years by the time that it is implemented?

Mr. Cotter: Exactly. I hope that the Minister understands that point of concern and will address it.

I welcome the clause that explicitly forbids the introduction of requirements for key escrow. I shall not say much about that because many hon. Members have covered it. The fact that the Government feel obliged to put a curb on their secondary powers is of concern.

Mr. Duncan: I am most encouraged by the fact that the hon. Gentleman agrees with so much of what I said. Do Liberal Democrats intend to vote with the Opposition on our reasoned amendment?

Mr. Cotter: We are concerned about many points, and we shall listen closely to the Minister's response. Although the Bill has some faults, we shall be able to discuss it in Committee. As the hon. Member for Esher and Walton pointed out, the Bill has its faults, but it also has some merit. We shall consider carefully what the Government say. The welter of reserve powers is of great concern, and occurs increasingly in Bills introduced by the Labour Government.

Another problem relates to a basic concept of the legal process. At present, a signature is valid only if one intends to make it so. In any dispute, the burden of proof is on the person who intends to rely on the signature, not on the person who is alleged to have made it. I am concerned that that distinction is in danger of being overturned by the measure. The evidential weight of a signature certified by an approved provider will be in favour of its recipient.

If consumers receive goods or services that they claim not to have ordered, a supplier may be able to hold them liable simply on the grounds of receipt of their electronic signature, and the burden of proof will be on consumers to prove that they did not make it.

Mr. Allan: Is my hon. Friend aware of the phenomenon of "granny chose a weak password and lost her house"? It applies where a grandson uses a computer to send something with a signature that was apparently valid, and—exactly for the reasons to which my hon. Friend referred—the consumer is held liable. If people cannot have confidence in their passwords, and the security of their home tenure, it will undermine the whole of e-commerce.

Mr. Cotter: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. In the light of earlier comments about including both genders, it would cover not only grannies but grandfathers. The Bill needs some tightening in respect of signatures.

Problems arise in relation to secondary powers and provisions that confer legislative powers on other Departments. The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce referred to sunset regulation. She also answered a question about whether the Home Office would be able to overrule the Bill, and made several other points. I look forward to hearing those points strengthened later in the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) referred to the fact that the Lord Chancellor's Department had stopped the transmission of an e-mail, and asked the Minister for an explanation. I understand that it contained a somewhat rude reference to a judge. I am not sure whether that was grounds for not permitting the transmission.

The Government's aims are admirable, and we welcome the slimmed-down Bill. It is important that we should have a Bill, but we urge the Government to consider the concerns expressed by Liberal Democrats and others, so that we can produce a Bill that we can all support.

7.4 pm

Barbara Follett (Stevenage): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important and timely debate, because, in the last few days of the second millennium, it is fitting that we should prepare for the demands of the third. Those demands are already with us. It is not only the century and the millennium that are coming to an end;

[Barbara Follett]

as we speak, our old ways of communicating, trading and gathering information are on the way out. We are in the middle of a change so swift and so silent that many of us are scarcely aware of it. None the less it is there, and it is profound.

During our debate, people throughout Britain have been buying clothes in America, books in London, shares in Australia, gifts in Scotland, cars in Bristol and groceries down the road—all without leaving their homes. Sitting at screens in their bedrooms and living rooms, people are looking for jobs, debiting and crediting their bank accounts, downloading information and entertainment and chatting with friends on the other side of the world. If they want, they can go on all night or all weekend, or throughout all public holidays. That is a radical change in our use of time. It is a 24-hour world, with 24-hour trading, communication and information available, globally, at the click of a mouse.

I welcome that. As a mother with children scattered all over the world, whose working hours are unsociable, to say the least, that change is a real boon—especially at this time of year, when, with alarming regularity, I remember that there are only 25 shopping days until Christmas, that I have bought only two presents and that I do not know to whom to give them. Christmas is hard on the feet and on the wallet; on-line shopping does nothing for the second, but does wonders for the first.

It is estimated that the British people—including my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness—will spend £14.2 billion on Christmas this year. As 13 million of us now have access to the internet, it is fair to assume that a sizeable amount of that money will be spent on-line. With 10,900 users coming on-line every day in Britain, that amount can only rise. In a year, the 179 million people who use the internet worldwide will rise to 250 million. Much of that growth will be in Europe, where it is predicted that one in three households will be on-line by 2004. Let us hope that much of that growth will take place in Britain. At present, we are second to Germany in the league table. By 2003, I want Britain to have the largest number of internet users in Europe.

Predictions for the growth of internet usage suggest slow but steady growth. Predictions for the growth of e-commerce suggest a sudden dramatic rise. In February this year, the market for e-commerce was estimated to be worth £12 billion; by 2004, it is predicted that it will reach £1 trillion. With figures like those, British businesses have no alternative but to go on-line. Many of them are on-line—especially retailers. That move may revive the fortunes of our high streets, where the reduction in the pressure for space resulting from the bigger supermarkets moving out may allow smaller niche stores to take advantage of the trend towards leisure shopping for unusual, individual items. I welcome that.

Most of the supermarkets are already on-line. Even the venerable Marks and Spencer went on-line at the weekend, although, admittedly, only to 1,000 select customers in Beaconsfield. I am not sure why Beaconsfield was chosen for the pilot scheme. Perhaps it has something to do with the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), or perhaps it has something to do with the fact that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister piloted his political career in that constituency, so perhaps it is a good area for pilots.

Banking on-line is well under way. Young people, in particular, prefer on-line accounts. As someone who, 30 years ago, worked in the hallowed marble halls of banks, I know how intimidating they are. On-line accounts are much more accessible, flexible and user-friendly; they are also far cheaper. However, the culture of call centres obviously needs a shake-up.

On-line share dealing is relatively new, but it is already enormously popular and it helps small investors to take on the mammoth firms. The launch of cut-price brokers has slashed the cost of buying and selling shares. Not surprisingly, the number of web-based share deals has more than tripled during the past few months. Small investors are making about 50,000 internet share deals a month, compared with fewer than 10,000 in January 1999. In the United States, where web-based share dealing began as recently as two years ago, a quarter of all trading is now done on-line, and 5 million people buy and sell electronically every day. Thanks to on-line information, small investors are coming into their own.

One of the newest developments on-line is the giving of donations, especially to the third world. I welcome the part that the Grameen bank—one of the leading groups in micro-financing in the third world—has played in bringing the internet to places such as India and Bangladesh. A subsidiary of the Grameen bank is now the largest internet provider in Bangladesh.

There is also much talk of third-world countries using the internet to make direct contact with firms in the first and second worlds, to deal directly with them, cut out the middle people and get a fair deal for their goods. That, like the other lightning-quick changes associated with the internet, poses problems for individuals, trading blocs and, in particular, Governments—problems that require careful and considered responses if they are not to kill the very thing that they are trying to foster.

Therefore, I am glad that the Bill, although a long time in coming, has been out to consultation twice before coming to the House. I am also glad that the Government took seriously the comments of those consulted, and amended the Bill in parts. We should be proud of the result. It addresses the concerns of consumers and producers alike, without overburdening them with regulation—a difficult balance to achieve—and despite the language, on which I am in complete agreement with the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), I thank those who drafted it.

On-line shoppers, bankers and share dealers throughout the world want security and confidentiality in their dealings on the net. Without that, we shall not get the trust necessary to develop the potential of the new technology. That is illustrated by a headline in this weekend's edition of the *Sunday Express*—

"We're afraid the 'E' stands for easily cheated"

says Simon Hinde, commenting on the software malfunction that caused a security breach in a major bank last week and allowed people to view other people's shares, causing a great deal of anxiety.

The Bill addresses some of that anxiety, especially with the introduction of electronic signatures, which are vital for the building of that trust. Part I, which provides for a list of the providers of electronic signatures, is also vital. We need the information, we need to know who the best providers are and we need the voluntary kitemark to which providers are being asked to subscribe.

I welcome all the provisions of the Bill, and I especially welcome the help that it will give my region. The eastern region, although one of the most developed areas, still lags behind London in its use of e-mail. Eighty-one per cent. of firms in London use e-mail, as opposed to 57 per cent. in the eastern region. That shows that we have a problem with take-up, because in the eastern region we have as many computers with modems as people have in London, but there is 23 per cent. under-usage of those PCs.

Mr. Cotter: Would the hon. Lady elaborate? Does she feel that that under-usage results from the fact that people are not well enough informed or from the costs of transmission?

Barbara Follett: I have spoken to businesses in my area about that. It is partly to do with the costs—although those businesses have invested in PCs—and partly to do with lack of training, but mainly to do with lack of confidence. People believe that if they put out on the net their signature, or something confidential, it can be read. In some cases, that fear is still well founded. People cannot be sure that their e-mails will be confidential.

The Bill goes a long way to restore that trust and confidence, so I welcome it. I know that, when it becomes law, people in the eastern region will feel better about giving credit card details. Worldwide transactions on the net are most often aborted when people are asked to key in their credit card number. Therefore, the net is being used much more as a marketing tool than as a purchasing tool. If we want to gain the maximum benefit from it, we must ensure that it is also used for buying and selling goods. That is such a challenge in the east of England that the development agency considers that its main task in the next few years is to encourage the spread of e-commerce.

As the Government will be doing 90 per cent. of their routine procurement on-line by 2000, businesses must take up the net. They must meet the challenge of that new technology. Furthermore, if we are going to face the future—the future in which we have set-top boxes and can access the net in ways other than by using PCs—we must ensure that people have confidence in that technology.

I look forward to the day when I can access NHS Direct as NHS on-line, interactively with my television or my PC, but I know that I shall want that information to be confidential. Who wants to share their bunions with the rest of the world, still less with the rest of the press? However, if I can be certain that my personal information will remain confidential, such access will be a marvellous tool. The Bill goes a long way to ensure that we meet, and are prepared for, the future.

7.17 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I start with two declarations of interest and two apologies. My first declaration of interest is the one in the Register of Members' Interests. I am chairman of a United Kingdom subsidiary of a Saudi Arabian company which owns one of the seven internet licences in Saudi Arabia. Other companies with which I am involved also have internet interests.

My second declaration is that I shall speak on behalf of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. The Committee has 11 members, 10 of whom are in Sweden at present. I am sure that they are doing very valuable parliamentary business there. I am the only member who appears not to be in Sweden, so it has fallen to me to speak in the debate on behalf of the Committee. For reasons that I shall explain, the Committee has done a fair amount of work on the Bill. I hope to share some of our—unanimous—thoughts with the House; during this Parliament, all our reports have been unanimous.

My first apology is that, in the Bill and the debate, there are many words that one just has to assume that everyone understands. Perhaps *Hansard* should include a glossary of terms such as escrow, encryption and T schemes. One must assume that everyone who takes part in the debate understands those terms, because it would otherwise be difficult to communicate.

My second apology is as follows. I discovered a little while ago, when things such as A to Zs and telephone directories became a blur, that I needed glasses. I have not yet cracked how to read and look at the Chamber simultaneously, and I have a choice: either hon. Members will be a blur or what I want to read will be a blur. I hope that hon. Members will not mind if I decide that it is preferable that they should be a blur and that I can read what I want to say.

The Select Committee has been considering e-commerce for more than a year. As I believe that we have all heard, proposals for the Bill have now been in two Queen's speeches. So for the first few months of 1999, the Select Committee was in a curious position: we began to take oral and written evidence, but the Government were unable or unwilling to produce a Green Paper or a White Paper, let alone a Bill. We had to respond to proposals of uncertain weight.

In March, a consultation document proposed, among other things, a statutory voluntary licensing scheme for cryptography service providers, a legal regime for electronic signatures centred on the introduction of a rebuttable presumption, the promotion of key escrow and key recovery technologies without making key escrow a criterion for licensing, and power for the law enforcement authorities to require keys or decoded texts under the equivalent of a warrant. The Select Committee on Trade and Industry considered the consultation document's proposals swiftly and reported in May. We recommended that there was a need to justify the rebuttable presumption regime, that powers to introduce a statutory scheme should come about only if a self-regulatory scheme was seen to fail, and that key escrow should be dropped altogether in favour of the proposed new power.

In June, the Select Committee reported on a range of e-commerce issues not in the legislative programme. In July, the Cabinet Office performance and innovation unit reported on a similar range of topics and, at the end of July, the Government published a Command Paper containing the reply to our report and the draft Bill. I am glad to say that the draft Bill adopted the Committee's recommendation that a statutory scheme should be introduced only when a voluntary scheme was seen to have failed, followed the Committee's lead and abandoned rebuttable presumption in favour of prevailing legal doctrines, and dropped key escrow promotion.

Earlier, it was said that the Government had listened to industry and business. I hope that, in taking evidence, the Select Committee also provided a way by which those concerned could make their views known to the House.

[Mr. Tony Baldry]

By producing a report, I hope that we were able to consolidate and harmonise those views. It is to the Government's credit that they took on board the unanimous report of the Select Committee.

The Select Committee does not hang about—indeed, we worked over the summer and produced a report based on the previous evidence. The Minister was once a member of the Committee, but he found the pace so fast that he asked the Whips whether he could be transferred to a job in government; he found it too difficult to keep up with us. The Committee considered the Department of Trade and Industry's response to written questions and the responses received by the Department about the draft Bill. It agreed a report on this draft Bill in late October. The report was published on 3 November and made several detailed recommendations.

It would be fair to say that the Select Committee welcomed the Bill. We welcome clause 13, which is in part III. It is a crucial new provision that responds to the Select Committee's recommendation that the Bill should explicitly exclude the use of key escrow as a criterion for accreditation under a statutory regime. Of course, more information is required on some subjects. In particular, information is required on the timetable for the commencement of parts I and II, on a draft of the T scheme and on its start date, which will be independent of the Act, and on the level of fees. Doubtless, such issues will be dealt with in Committee.

Some measures have been added to the draft Bill that require explicit justification. They include the clause 8(3) change to relax the criteria for record keeping of electronic storage or communication, and the clause 9(6) rider, which expands the scope of orders made under clause 8. Part III, which was formerly part IV, on telecommunications licence modifications, is not only an ever more evident add-on, but raises fresh unease because it will give added powers to the director to decide what constitutes a significant minority for objections. There has been no sign of movement on the process for changes deemed regulatory, but it is balanced by an attempt to clarify grounds for appeal.

I suspect that the members of the Select Committee and of the Standing Committee will want to ask specific questions. It would unfair to detain the House on those points now, because they are matters for Committee. However, it will be good if the Government can keep the House and industry abreast of the implementation dates for various provisions in the Bill. They are not always self-evident from the Bill and people will want to know when the different provisions will apply.

Although it is a narrow Bill, its provisions are clearly worth implementing. I hope that the kitemark of approval and the Bill itself will start to encourage consumer confidence. The hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) made a sensible and proportionate contribution and she made it clear—I think that everyone would agree with this—that although the internet and e-commerce are expanding exponentially, huge numbers of people are wary of using the internet simply because they are worried about fraud. If the Bill can help reassure consumers that such fraud will not take place, it will promote consumer confidence and e-commerce in this country.

Whatever we do in legislation, concerns will remain with which legislation simply cannot deal. In an earlier report, the Select Committee expressed concern about what is known in shorthand as the "digital divide", through which the poor and the elderly feel excluded from the internet. It is not easy to legislate for that problem, but public policy should be concerned about it. As public policy makes provision for services, such as NHS services, to become more readily and more easily available on the internet, we must recognise that, for all sort of reasons, some people will for a long time find the internet difficult to use.

Mr. White: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that voluntary groups have a key role to play in ensuring that access to the internet and similar facilities is available to all? I commend the example of Sweden and Finland, which have gone down that route. Does he think that such an approach is useful?

Mr. Baldry: When my colleagues return from Sweden, I am sure that they will bring with them good news about that. I visited a college of further education in Banbury the other day and saw signs for a course entitled, "Computing for the terrified". I have enlisted for the next course that the college runs.

On Europe, it is important that we recognise the value of the European Union's internal market as our marketplace. In so far as the Bill sets a precedent for the rest of the European Community, it will be good news. However, the Standing Committee considering the Bill must recognise that the European single market is our domestic market and that we must consider liabilities and consumer rights in the internal market. I accept, however, that that will involve complex issues, such as when contracts are signed.

Will the Minister say a little more about the e-envoy or e-tsar? Everyone now seems to be a tsar, and I am looking forward to being appointed one. Some of us are not allowed to sit on the Opposition Front Bench, so perhaps a few more "tsarships" could be given out. It strikes me that one of the great virtues of the Russian royal family was that everyone seemed to be related to one other and everyone had a title.

The story of the e-envoy is not a happy one because that seems to be a virtual appointment, and he or she has a role to demonstrate that e-commerce is not all pornography, gambling and electronic boot sales. I suspect, however, that the e-envoy has a very important role, but I am not sure that it has been fully or sufficiently promulgated to the House, to industry or more widely.

If or when the Bill obtains its Second Reading, the Minister and the Department might consider using the vast army of Government information officers to ensure that more work is done in the business pages and in the media generally to explain the Bill, not to those who are already knowledgeable about it, but to the broad sweep of people in business or commerce. They will want more clearly to understand the Government's proposals and what exactly people such as the e-envoy will do.

I have seen the reasoned amendment in the name of my right hon. and hon. Friends, and the Opposition have decided collectively that they must vote against the Bill. As I believe in collective government and therefore in collective opposition, I shall join my colleagues in

the Lobby. Suffice it to say that the Select Committee's recommendations were unanimous and, on behalf of the Select Committee, I thank the Government in so far as they have listened to those recommendations.

7.31 pm

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Thirty years ago last month, the internet was born. It connected nuclear scientists in a restricted number of universities across America, courtesy of the Pentagon. I suppose that today we would call that an intranet. A second system was then devised that linked all academia in America. That was our first e-mail system, and it is called the internet.

Eight years ago, however, a Brit, Tim Berners-Lee, working at the CERN laboratories in Switzerland, gave us a brand new language—www, or the worldwide web—and the modern graphical internet arrived to change our lives. Tim, who is not yet Sir Tim or even Lord Web, ought to be a vice-chancellor or a professor of computation in the United Kingdom, but alas he works at the media laboratory at Harvard. Although we have just announced a link between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Cambridge, it is a pity that we have not properly enabled Imperial college, which is easily the best science and technology centre of excellence in the United Kingdom. Imperial already outstrips Oxford, and ought to be given university status of its own and the chance to become our own Stanford university. However, I digress.

Before discussing the Bill, I should put on record that I am the—alas unremunerated—non-executive chairman of the council of Clicksure, which has offices in Oxford and Washington DC. Clicksure is an ethical—I must be careful about the use of that word—standards association on the internet which analyses websites.

Last week, on the BBC show "Watchdog", Anne Robinson took great pleasure in upsetting a website called "lastminute.com", which is a brilliant site run by a brilliant UK company. Somehow the "Watchdog" team managed to book two tickets from its site with a dodgy credit card. Had "lastminute.com" been clicksured, that could not have happened. Clicksure evaluates a website to check that it is safe, so that consumers can trust it. That has some relevance to today's discussions of the Bill.

I am also the founder of the World Internet Forum. This morning, we addressed more than 60 ambassadors and their staff on the subject of the forum, which will take place in Oxford next September. The World Internet Forum aims to become a portal for public services in the world.

E-commerce can have the most stimulating effect on a company's bottom line. Let us consider Cisco, the US Nasdaq-listed router company, which worked out that the cost of a conventional invoice was just over $100. When it switched to electronic invoicing, it saved a cool $600 million in the first year because the average cost of the same invoice was just under 50 cents. I wonder where the innovation in this country is when a company such as Cisco can show us the way.

The Bill has been a long time in gestation, but it is all the better for it. It is in three parts, and I shall discuss each one, in reverse order. The last part, which deals with telecommunications issues, is a bolt-on and clears up issues dating back to 1984. I shall not detain the House further on that because I have noted that the Minister has already agreed to go out to wider consultation on that; and it needs wider consultation.

The middle part, entitled "Facilitation of electronic commerce, data storage, etc.", deals only with electronic signatures, and I want to address the problem of voice signatures. I shall try to explain the new technology that is already on the market, which inverts the www language, and is currently called "mmm". Mmm is part of the WAP—the wireless application protocol. I shall try to explain how it works.

I have said before that the House is not kitted out for the 21st century, but I have here a tri-band mobile phone which is currently on sale in the United Kingdom. It is voice-activated, as most phones are, but in this case I mean that I can gain internet access by talking to it. I can phone a number and by talking via the website on the phone I can ask for the train times from Sittingbourne to Victoria. That information will be voice-activated and sent back to me.

Hon. Members may ask what that has to do with signatures, but what if I were phoning my bank? There would have to be a voice signature for the new technology as well as an electronic signature. I want better to understand whether the electronic signature arrangement adequately covers the voice wireless application protocol. I can see civil servants nodding and I will be reassured if that is the case.

Mr. Duncan: Is not voice recognition a form of unique encryption which is delivered electronically? I therefore guess, and hope, that it is included in the Bill.

Mr. Wyatt: I am getting reassurance from the civil servants who drafted the Bill. Let us wait and see whether that is the case.

I am not quite sure which Department would be responsible for the second part of the technology that I shall describe, but I shall try to explain it clearly. I have here a mobile phone and a credit card. I am sure that hon. Members understand what those things are, but from next year, credit cards will change and will contain a chip. That can be inserted in the phone, and, using the voice mode, I can phone and order money to be downloaded on to the card, or I can tell the card to purchase jeans or anything else that I want to buy.

For that technology to be effective, a third party must hold my details, such as the interests that I subscribe to, which include Charlton Athletic and English rugby. I would therefore have to trust the details of the card to a third-party holder. That is not provided for in data protection legislation. That technology is already available in trials, and 1,000 such phones are on trial in Leeds this week. They are also on trial in Finland and America.

Changes are occurring in the way in which the internet is accessed and credit cards are used. If one says, as the Opposition do, "Let us not have regulation," I reply that we have to be careful not only to explain what is happening to the UK population but to make sure that we

[Mr. Wyatt]

have a proper safety environment. That is why I think that you are wrong, if you do not mind my saying so, about your opposition to that part of the Bill—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The Chair is never wrong.

Mr. Wyatt: I wish that I could get away with saying that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I want to know, as the technology is currently available, whether there will be an opportunity to include it in the Bill, so that the Bill is the best that we can provide.

That brings me back to the light-touch framework that we have agreed on. The basic issues of the internet are ones of trust. We have to make sure that when we order goods, we receive what we ordered. It is very easy to trust amazon.com.uk. Why? All the credit card companies came together and guaranteed purchases from amazon.com.uk. Unfortunately, not every credit card company will give its guarantee that every one of the 10 million websites can be trusted. We need to develop a common trust—a way of branding a website front page, so that when people see the brand, such as the Clicksure, Consumers Association or *"Which?"* brands, they will know that the site is safe and secure. The more the Government can do in that respect, the better, and that is what is laid out in the Bill.

Dr. Palmer: As I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, efforts in the United States to develop some sort of kitemark have run into difficulty, because a great many websites display some form of kitemark, but do not fulfil the functions envisaged for it. Does he have views on how we should tackle that problem, so as to prevent our kitemark from being discredited?

Mr. Wyatt: That is a tough problem, and I do not think that there is a technical solution to it.

The first part of the Bill, entitled "Cryptography service providers", is the most interesting. However, I have a problem, and I hope that the Minister will be able to ease my concerns. The internet is global, but in the Bill, we are agreeing a UK signature scheme inside a European framework. Fifty-eight per cent. of our business is in Europe and 12 per cent. in America. What is the validity of a UK signature on the one hand, and an American signature on the other, on an electronic document?

In addition, we have to take into account enlargement of the EU, which currently encompasses 15 countries, but which might include as many as 28 in future. Not all those countries are internet friendly or internet savvy, so what will be the legal position in respect of the directive in countries other than the current 15?

I struggle with the question of where in the world we are to draw up a global standard. I am not sure it will be the United Nations and I doubt it will be UNESCO; it might be the G8, but that might not be fair; I hope it will be the World Internet Forum, but I might be prejudiced. We have to consider the issue, because signatures must be uniform; otherwise, America will determine the rules by default, based on the fact that 90 per cent. of all servers are American and 92 per cent. of all traffic is either American or goes to America. We do not want America to take all the trade, and thus all the tax.

I know that OECD committees are struggling with that issue and with ways in which to account for VAT and corporation tax. My hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce referred my attention to a commendable Customs and Excise paper that she received on Friday. I hope that it is more reassuring than the telephone conversations I have had with representatives of Customs and Excise.

Let me explain the problem. When ordering CD-ROMs from Amazon.com, one is allowed to order only £18 pounds' worth before becoming liable for purchase tax or VAT. However, the orders go through at such an alarming rate that Customs and Excise would have to treble or quadruple its staff to measure how much VAT was leviable. Hundreds of pounds worth of goods can be delivered to one's home, but one will not be asked to pay any VAT. Where is tax to be paid? How is it to be collected?

Mr. Gibb: When goods are ordered from abroad by phone or by post, if they come in a parcel—as physical goods—Federal Express or whoever delivers the parcel independently and charges the buyer VAT and duty on the goods. There is no difference if the goods are ordered via new technology.

Mr. Wyatt: That is not the case—I have talked the issue through with Customs and Excise. It ought to be so, but it is not.

The other EU-related problem arises from its attempt to base its regulations on country of origin. How big a police force would the EU need to police the net when trillions of deals are done on it every day?

I support the unmetered calls brigade. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce also favours such a move, and I wonder whether she can give us a clue as to how it can gradually be introduced, initially to socially excluded people. A gradual approach, extending over the next two years, should be taken to the introduction of unmetered calls, so that poorer families receive the benefit first.

I have led the campaign in the House to end BT's local loop monopoly. It should be broken up sooner than Oftel recommended. Mention has been made of the Oftel culture, an example of which is that Oftel agreed that the local loop should be broken up, but gave BT 18 months to gets its opposition in first. However, there is no logical reason why the local loop cannot be broken up tomorrow.

I hope I can persuade Ministers to consider how we can become a smarter nation, even though the matter is not covered by the Bill. In 1951, we gave a tonic to the nation, and I hope that in 2001 we can give a present to the nation. The Millennium Commission ceases on 31 December 2000, giving us an opportunity to reallocate the lottery money. I am making a pitch for infrastructure to become something on which lottery money can be spent. It would be wonderful if, on 1 January 2001, we could give every home an internet machine, thus becoming the smartest community in the world. We can afford it, the lottery money is there, and it would be a fantastic gesture.

The explanatory notes to the Bill state that the Government

"has set itself targets for making Government services available electronically: 25 per cent. by 2002, 50 per cent. by 2005 and 100 per cent. by 2008. The Government has also set a target for 90 per cent. of its routine procurement of goods to be done electronically by 2001."

Over the past two years, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who has ultimate responsibility for dealing with the millennium bug, and I have engaged in friendly debate. I asked her to produce a league table of Departments to enable us to assess risks from the bug Department by Department. Eventually, a sort of league table was agreed.

In the same spirit, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce to designate a single Minister to be responsible for procurement delivery systems—it would be helpful if it were she. May we also be told the name of the Minister in each Department who is responsible for procurement? As was done in respect of the millennium bug, would a quarterly report to the House be possible, to enable the House to know how each Department was implementing the electronic delivery system?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I was interested to read the hon. Gentleman's comments, published on the BBC news website. He said:

"The trouble is that many traditional Labour people come from the public sector and they are the last people to understand where we are on this."

Will he confirm that those were his comments? Does he think that the necessary talent to fulfil such a role is available on the Labour Back Benches? Did he not also say that the Government's approach—to establish an e-tsar and a Minister in the Department of Trade and Industry—was mad?

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Deny it.

Mr. Wyatt: I should never deny that—it was on the web. It is a serious point that many Labour Members of Parliament have come from the public service sector, and many of those who were elected in 1983, 1987 or 1992 missed the introduction of the internet in their place of business or their public service office. As for the e-tsar and the e-commerce Minister, I have been on record since October 1997 as saying that they should form part of the Cabinet Office.

During our first debate on the internet, in March 1998, I stated my belief that we needed a new Government department of communications; I still believe that. The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) referred to this matter in his speech, but did not seem to know where to take it. The internet would enable services to be delivered better, quicker and cheaper, but it also challenges us with a fundamental question: what is the future of government? As a culture, we have not yet addressed the question of what the internet will do to us, to government and to Whitehall. Massive Departments are not needed if the medium of the internet is understood and utilised to its fullest potential.

I welcome the Bill. It is drafted in the right spirit and is exactly what we need. I congratulate the Government.

7.50 pm

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): The Bill addresses a subject of monumental national economic self-interest. The significance of e-commerce is difficult to overestimate. The statistics supporting that proposition are certainly worth repetition. It is estimated that in 1998 business-to-business e-commerce amounted to about $43 billion worldwide. That is predicted to rise to about $300 billion by 2002. The value of e-commerce between businesses and consumers is at a lower figure. It was about $7 billion worldwide in 1998 but it is expected to rise to about $80 billion in 2002. Citizen-to-Government e-commerce is the subject of some not very ambitious Government targets, as my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) observed. To have 25 per cent. of Government services available on-line by 2001 does not seem especially ambitious, and it does not appear that the Government are leading the way as they should.

It is clearly the Government's duty to ensure that UK plc is in pole position on the information superhighway rather than having to pull over into the information superlayby. Having read the Bill and having listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), I am not convinced that the Bill will do much to put us in the first category rather than in the second.

It is a truism that e-commerce is developing so rapidly that legislators throughout the world are finding it difficult to keep up with the pace of change. It is said by some commentators that in a perfect world it would be best for companies if every country had the same law regulating e-commerce transactions. We know that in the real world that would take years to negotiate, if that ever proved possible. We know also that ratification on an international treaty level would be very much a pipe dream. The Opposition have faith in the market and we have faith also in light and effective legislation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton observed, only where legislation is absolutely necessary.

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce said that the industry had welcomed much of the Bill, and followed that up with some selective quotation. She should not get carried away. We have only to read what the Select Committee on Trade and Industry stated in its report, which was published at the time of the draft Bill in the summer. It made many criticisms of the Government but the one that caught my eye was in paragraph 34, which referred to

"inadequate political control being exercised over the development and determination of cryptography policy. The policy . . . has been allowed to drift for too long. It is imperative that Ministers take a firm grip of the issues from now on."

In her opening speech and in her press notice launching the Bill, the Minister was voluble in her near-breathless enthusiasm and excitement about Britain leading the world in the first industrial revolution. She was keen for us to be leading the new revolution. She talked about how important it was to modernise—a key new Labour word—so that we could lead the world again. She said that she was determined "to get e-commerce law right and get it in fast." She also spoke approvingly of how the Bill would become one of the UK's first 21st century Acts.

It has taken the Government two-and-a-half years to get the Bill into the Chamber. We had a draft Bill in the summer which was manifestly a false start. We now have a deeply flawed Bill which has not been completely cleaned up following the draft Bill. I wish briefly to speak about the Bill's defects.

In part I, the Government propose a kitemarked self-regulated approval scheme covering all companies offering cryptographic services. That replaces the original proposal to require all such providers to have a licence, a

[Mr. David Ruffley]

condition of which was that cryptography providers would have to hold copies of customers' private encryption keys and provide law enforcement agencies with access to such keys in certain circumstances. That so-called key escrow proposal has been dropped, and I think sensibly. We have heard comments from hon. Members on both sides of the House to that effect. Instead, we now have a self-regulatory scheme which purports to ensure minimum standards of quality and service. A register of approved providers of cryptography support services will be established.

I agree with the Law Society and with my hon. Friends—even the Liberal Democrats chipped in with support on this point—when they say that part I could properly have been dispensed with. In the interests of a lighter and more punchy Bill, we could have done without it.

Part I purports to allow people to check who has sent an electronic message, ensure that it has not been tampered with and that no one has had access to it in any other way. The register will be voluntary. No provider is obliged to apply for approval and the provider who is not on the register is at liberty under the clauses within part I to provide cryptography services. I think that the Minister pats herself on the back by saying that there is a sunset clause in relation to the implementation of a statutory scheme as a last resort. She seems to hope that that will not be necessary within the five-year period.

That does not get away from the fact that there are unanswered questions on part I. First, there is no indication how we can tell whether the self-regulatory regime works. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton has asked about that on two occasions. How will it be judged? When the Minister for Competitiveness replies, I hope that he will explain why Ministers could not publish a timetable in advance of this evening's debate for the establishment of the industry-led voluntary scheme. The Department has had a couple of years to get to grips with the matter. I would have hoped we could have more details by now.

The second unanswered question in relation to part I is the thorny issue of fees for certification, which has not been debated very much so far this evening. Fees under the industry-led scheme are still murky. The Department of Trade and Industry said that the scheme should be run on a non-profit-making basis. In its draft regulatory impact assessment, the DTI talked about the difficulties of estimating the scale of fees that approved service providers were likely to be charged. Its excuse was, "We have not determined the standards, therefore we cannot work out accreditation costs." I fail to understand why the Minister cannot give us an indication of the fees that are likely to be charged to approved providers under the industry-led scheme. It is particularly important that service providers which are small or medium-size enterprises are not deterred from seeking accreditation by the level of fees charged.

If the fees are set at a commensurate cost of accreditation—in other words, a flat rate—they may be heavily disproportionate for smaller businesses. Have the Ministers done any work at all on the case for a sliding scale of fees to be set for accreditation so as to reduce the barriers to entry for very small companies? The Department is keen to emphasise how pro-business and pro-small business it is. Let us have some answers about what it will be doing to help smaller enterprises that seek to enter the market, once the scheme is up and running.

I shall deal next with part II and the admissibility of electronic signatures. The Bill seeks to clarify the admissibility of electronic signatures in legal proceedings, while leaving it to the courts to decide what weight to assign to those electronic signatures at law. That is sensible in principle and we support it.

However, clauses 8 and 9, which introduce that, are rather a dog's breakfast. They empower Ministers through statutory instruments to amend existing statutes to allow for the use of electronic signatures and records, but the decision to allow electronic signatures and records to fulfil paper and writing requirements in existing UK statute depends on individual Ministers across all Whitehall Departments, in their own sweet time, when they feel like it, reviewing all the relevant statutory provisions under their departmental territorial jurisdiction.

As the Society for Computers and Law observed, there are an estimated 40,000 references in existing British legislation to the words "writing" and "signature". The Bill gives no indication of the time scale by which all that will be reviewed by all relevant Ministers across Departments. That is why the Government should ensure now that each Department publishes its priorities for using secondary legislation to update the definition of those words in law. The Government should also be encouraged to publish a timetable by which the review is carried out by each Department. This is too important a matter to rest on the individual priorities of Ministers—many of them hard-working, I am sure. I urge the Minister to consider the matter without delay.

Unless the Government follow the suggested course of action, businesses will be confronted with great uncertainty. They will have the regulatory burden of monitoring the haphazard introduction of amendments to existing statutes, in order to find out which statutory requirements can be satisfied by electronic writing.

In offering that modest proposal, I have the Alliance for Electronic Business on my side. The alliance was prayed in aid by Ministers earlier in the debate, and I know that the Minister for Competitiveness has a great deal of time for it. With regard to clause 8, the alliance states that statutory instruments must be put before Parliament rapidly. It goes on:

"Industry would be disappointed if the deadline were set later than the end of 2000. This probably means that work must begin immediately, in anticipation of passage of the Bill."

The alliance continues—and this is the key point:

"Our member companies have a number of electronic commerce initiatives that depend upon a legal framework for electronic signatures being in place."

Most importantly, the Alliance for Electronic Business states:

"Unless the statutory instruments are laid quickly, those initiatives cannot be implemented, reducing the growth of electronic commerce in the UK and risking the leadership that our industry currently holds in European and global markets."

Conservative Members endorse the concerns of the alliance.

Has the Minister for Competitiveness done any work at all to examine the adoption of the approach which, I believe, is found in the draft Irish Electronic Commerce Act, the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act in the

United States, and the Uniform Electronic Commerce Act in Canada? Those statutes apparently allow all written and paper requirements found in law to be satisfied electronically, except for a limited carve-out relating to documents representing quasi-public legal acts such as deeds and wills. Can the Minister tell us whether any work has been done by the Department which would meet the concern that I flagged up, and which the alliance has also flagged up.

Finally on part II, I am concerned about the way in which the Government view businesses' applications for Government licences or permits, when those businesses make the application using electronic writing. The Government's suggestion is that different fees might be charged for electronic communications, compared with non-electronic communications, because as we know, electronic handling of data is typically less expensive than the use of non-electronic systems. The implication from the Government is that firms and individuals who are able to communicate electronically with Government will benefit from lower fees than those reliant on pen and paper.

From a glance at last year's Finance Bill, we already know that the Revenue proposes a financial concession to those Inland Revenue taxpayers who are able to submit their tax return electronically. Do the Government propose to charge different fees for electronic and non-electronic communication? Will disadvantaged groups, who are not IT-literate or do not have access to IT, be penalised as a result? The Bill is strangely silent on that, but it is a topic that we need to discuss, if not tonight, then in Committee.

In addition, can Ministers clarify the Government's policy regarding discounts for those who use electronic communications when dealing with Government Departments—for instance, in connection with a VAT return or a corporate tax return?

The DTI stated in evidence to the Select Committee:

"In the case of a service designed to cover its costs rather than to raise revenue, it might be appropriate for the Government to pass on its cost savings expected from the electronic handling of data to the fee payer."

That is hugely important. Should we take that to mean that the Government will not treat that regime of differential discounts for those who use electronic writing in their dealings with Departments as a revenue-raising exercise? Many Opposition Members are suspicious of the Government and are worried that that may be a ruse for more Government stealth tax in this area, and that any cost savings will not be passed back to the fee payer, but will be trousered or pocketed by the Government in the process of levying fees. We will watch carefully how the Government handle the fee regime.

This is a limited Bill, the more so as part III of the draft Bill now falls to be dealt with by the Home Office. Nevertheless, the defects of the Bill before us are manifest. I trust that Opposition Members will use straightforward common sense to table amendments to remedy those defects.

8.9 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): It was interesting to follow the contribution of the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley). I understand the games that the Opposition must play. If the Government are over-regulating in some area, they must accuse the Government of heavy-handedness and say that they are in favour of a light touch. If the Government decide to take a minimal approach to legislation, the Opposition must accuse them of neglect, and say that a heavy approach is required. If the Government go too fast, they are being hasty. If they go too slowly, they are accused of dragging their feet.

If the Government consult and listen, they are accused of U-turns; if they consult and do not change the Bill, they are accused of arrogance. I understand these games, but this debate is unique in my experience because the Opposition have taken all six positions on the same Bill. Therefore, I am left to conclude that they know deep down that the measure is reasonable, and they are simply doing what they perceive to be their duty: opposing it on any grounds.

Before I proceed, I declare a small interest, which is in the Register of Members' Interests. I have an unremunerated directorship in a charity that provides IT training in the Thanet area. I have also had a long career in IT, and I shall say a little more about that shortly.

The Government should be congratulated on their approach to the consultation exercise. They have introduced a variety of novel methods for scrutinising legislation, including Special Standing Committees and Special Select Committees, and publishing draft Bills. The Government have consulted endlessly on the Bill that we are considering today.

Today's debate has been a bit of an anti-climax for me because when the Government published their initial proposals, I had some major anxieties about them and I imagined myself getting involved in a rebellion and fighting for change. *[Interruption.]* I did not mean that seriously, in case any Whips are listening. The Government have listened to every point that was made in the consultation process and the Bill is consequently benign, and is supported across the IT industry.

For most of my life, I have worked in jobs related to IT—I have spent nearly three decades in the industry. That is probably a unique record. I started learning programming when punch cards were used. When I did my research degree in the late 1970s, on the site of the National Engineering Laboratory in East Kilbride, the technology had moved on a step and we used punched paper tape. We punched our data or programmes on to paper tape and left it in specific mail boxes around the site. A lady would come round on her bicycle to collect it once a day and she would return it later. When the processing power of the computer was to be upgraded, the most cost-effective method of achieving that was by buying the lady a faster bicycle. The following year, the processing power was reviewed again, and it was decided that the best way of improving the system was to employ a younger lady.

I had a variety of jobs that involved managing and building computer networks. I built one of the first mini computer networks in the country. In the late 1980s, I introduced one of the first ethernets in the country. In those days, ethernet used a protocol called Xerox Network Software—XNS—because the Xerox corporation invented ethernet. Later, I converted it to a new-fangled piece of software called the Transaction Computing Protocol and Internet Protocol, or TCP/IP. It was probably one of the country's first intranets, but I did not realise

[Dr. Stephen Ladyman]

that at the time. In the 1990s, I worked in IT management for a major pharmaceutical company. Later, I want to refer especially to my experience there.

I tell the House about these aspects of my past partly to establish my authority to speak about IT matters and to make a case for being considered as a member of the Standing Committee on the Bill. I also want to bring home the point that the pace of change in the industry has been so dramatic that the complexity of computer systems and the available processing power has increased by a factor of about 1,000 in a small part of one man's career. We cannot even begin to imagine the shape of computing if the pace of change increases by a further factor of 1,000 over the next 20 years. Can anyone begin to contemplate the future of business and IT in those circumstances?

In our deliberations on the Bill, we must be careful to include nothing that will hold back the pace of change or tie us to obsolete legislation as technology moves on. We cannot use the law to restrict the pace of technology; we can only hope that the law will harness it for us.

Mr. Gibb: Given the hon. Gentleman's experience in IT and in view of his comments, does he want part I of the Bill to be enacted, or would he prefer that it was not enforced?

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman pre-empts one of my points. I may be alone among hon. Members in worrying about the Government's intention to allow self-regulation. I doubt whether that will do the job. As I said in European Standing Committee C recently, in my experience, many people who work in IT believe that they cannot make mistakes. They see themselves as being in total control of the technology, knowing everything about it and being able to devise systems that contain no errors or loopholes. It is only when managers become more experienced that they realise that everything has holes in it and can be overcome. Therefore, I wonder whether there is a case for the Government to prescribe who is a trusted third party, establish the rules and ensure that the third parties are policed and the system monitored. I hope that the Government are right and that the industry can devise a system for self-regulation. They are certainly right to retain the power to regulate the industry if it does not come up to scratch.

The Bill has improved greatly during the consultation process. Mandatory key escrow would have been disastrous for many reasons, not least for civil rights reasons although, as the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) said earlier, key escrow can benefit some industries. I can envisage circumstances in which the pharmaceutical industry would find key escrow beneficial. Therefore, the Government are right not to make it mandatory, but it should remain an option for industries. We should not simply say that it has no value.

I do not believe that many industries that exist in a heavily regulated environment will support the Opposition amendment, which claims that the Bill provides for unnecessary regulation. One of my key tasks in the pharmaceutical industry was to help to devise computer systems that could manage the publication of the regulatory documents that the industry had to put together.

To get approval to sell a drug in this country, an international regulatory dossier has to be produced. In the United States, such a document is called a new drug application. An international regulatory dossier will certainly extend to tens of thousands of pages, but in the United States, where the raw data are produced for the regulatory agencies to go through and there is no process of reducing that data, documents running to hundreds of thousands of pages have to be produced. When I started work in the pharmaceutical industry, such documents were pumped out on printers and typewriters and armies of people stood at photocopiers all day long producing copy after copy after copy. One used to turn over the largest conference hall operated by the company to the collation of all that paperwork and eventually—when the 12 copies of that huge document were all bound and the 100,000 pages were in the right order and catalogued—someone would come running in and say, "I'm sorry, we've dropped a page and there is a new page 5. We have to go through the whole document again." It would then have to be put into removal vans to be taken to the regulatory agencies.

That process was obviously crying out to be computerised, which it now is. I do not know whether the same situation still pertains, but a couple of years ago—even though it was possible to produce an electronic review aid for such material called a computer-aided new drug application in the United States and a computer-assisted product licence application in this country—a paper copy of the document had to be printed out for someone to sign and authorise as the true copy. For all legal purposes, the electronic version was never the true copy.

There will be a cost saving to the industry because it will be able to produce an entirely electronic version of its regulatory documents—with an electronic signature—and use something that the House has not focused on in the debate: the ability, if one is using public and private key encryption, to encrypt an entire document. For the first time, not only will a document carry a signature on the last page saying who has produced it, but there will be a way of guaranteeing the authenticity of that document, from the title on the first page to the last full stop. That is what the industry is crying out for and the Bill's key function is to make such provision. I would not call such measures over-regulation, nor would the pharmaceutical companies and the defence industry; they represent a much-needed improvement to the way in which companies work—one that they will be able to use in the future.

The Government are also to be particularly congratulated on their work in another area. There was some talk from the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), the Opposition spokesman, about the complexity of the Bill's wording, but the parliamentary draftsmen have been particularly astute in clause 7. Nothing in that clause will have any detrimental effect if technology changes in the near future. If we were to use such technology now, we would probably use some form of private and public key encryption to achieve our aims, but in five years there may be a far better way of achieving them, or certainly a different way. I understand that the clause would be just as valid whatever form of technology was deployed and the Government should be congratulated on that.

The Bill should not be considered in isolation because it is not enough alone to achieve successful IT and e-commerce industries in this country. In addition, we need the regulations that are currently being considered

by the European Union and were recently discussed in European Standing Committee C. Those regulations will govern such things as where a contract is made, if one is ordering from an internet site, as well as further extending the way in which we view electronic signatures. I have some concerns about the way in which that debate is developing and I believe that, in certain circumstances, internet service providers are fulfilling the role of either a retailer or a wholesaler. Sometimes, there should be a contract between a customer and the internet service provider, never mind the person who provides the goods being sold through the internet service provider. I am not entirely sure that the EU regulations have got that as clear as it ought to be.

We need this e-commerce Bill and the regulations that the EU is considering, but we also need the TrustUK hallmark, which my hon. Friend the Minister discussed earlier. I consider that to be absolutely vital. If we want customers to use an internet service to buy material, they have to have absolute trust in it. As hon. Members were speaking, I made a list of what I would look for in a site before I would send it my credit card details. I would want to know that the company had quality management and that its technical back-up and management was of an appropriate quality so that security issues would be dealt with appropriately. I would want to know about the probity of the company, its financial backing and integrity, the quality of the goods, the exchange policy for the goods and the reliability of supply. The final two issues of course, are cost and range of choice.

The only two requirements effectively available to small businesses or start-up companies would be cost and range of choice. People would not have heard of such companies, so there would be no way in which they could satisfy the first seven requirements in the mind of the customer. Companies such as Marks and Spencer are going on to the internet because they know that their brand name is a guarantee to customers. People will be prepared to shop with Marks and Spencer in a way that they would not be prepared to shop with Bloggs and Co. or any other company that might have decided to set up on the internet.

It was particularly unwise of the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton to imply that the brand name and reputation of a particular company would make it acceptable for people to trade with it in an unregulated environment. He was saying, "If you're a new business, go away; if you're a start-up company, go away; if you're a man in the street who wants to set up an internet site, go away."

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that there are now virtual shopping malls where a business can set up shop and come under the umbrella of a recognised method of selling via the internet? When people purchase a product through the internet, they probably use a credit card. The credit card companies ultimately take the risk, because they guarantee that their customers will not get ripped off on the net. Is it not the companies at the heart of the system that are at risk, not the customer or the small guy who is trying to get on the bottom rung of the ladder?

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman is right, and he makes a good point about shopping malls. If credit card companies guarantee products on behalf of companies operating from those malls, they will charge a commission for that service, and a small business may not want to pay that. As the hon. Gentleman said, people can pay with a credit card. I have a credit card that I use only for internet shopping, so that I can check the bill carefully and make sure that I am not being cheated. On the other hand, how many people realise that debit cards with a little Visa sign on them, which often look like other credit cards in their wallets, are not covered by the same credit protection legislation? People may shop with a debit card thinking that they are getting the protection to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but they have no protection at all. Indeed, they may be in a worse position, because their debit cards may give away bank account details to unscrupulous people. What the hon. Gentleman says is true to a certain extent, but the Conservative party has not thought out its opposition to the Bill as well as it should have done.

Dr. Palmer: I agree with my hon. Friend about the Opposition's position on new companies and the bias towards certain trade names. Does he agree that having an established brand name is not necessarily a guarantee for the customer? For instance, the Conservative party has a website. If he were to check it against his nine criteria, it would fail all nine.

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend is right to remind me that not all brand names are as reliable as others.

I believe that the Government have listened to representations made to them. Had they rushed into this legislation, as some Conservatives wanted, we would have been saddled with a Bill that would have been wrong. They have done the right thing by listening, and they have adapted the Bill appropriately. As someone who is experienced in the industry, I am delighted to say that I shall support it tonight, and I hope to have further to do with the Bill at later stages.

8.31 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Despite an element of partisanship in some of the remarks that we have just heard, I count it a privilege to participate in a debate in which hon. Members are so evidently knowledgable about their subject. It is a tribute to the House that we have so many Members with outside interests who are engaged at the forefront of new developments in commerce.

Like other hon. Members, I have some interests to declare. They have spurred my interest in e-commerce, and have helped me to realise the potential of this new world. I am chairman of a joinery business in the west country that has recently set up its own website. In our own small way, we see the advantages of the Bill and the development of e-commerce for our business, because it enables us to extend our network of contacts.

Through the Industry and Parliament Trust, I am currently involved in a fellowship with DHL, the international company that provides a delivery service overnight around the world from business to business and business to consumer. For that company and their many competitors, there has been a revolution in expectations and in the way in which they do business. One of the results of the growth in e-commerce is a demand for business to consumer and business to business delivery services. Those companies are set to grow rapidly.

I am privileged to represent Guildford, which is at the forefront of new technology. The town is recognised as one of Britain's leading centres for the development of

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software. Not only do we have access to telecom lines, but more than 60 per cent. of houses will have cable access by the end of next year as an alternative and more efficient means of reaching the new technology.

I come to this issue from a different angle. I sense that our country is on the threshold of a golden opportunity to become a centre for e-commerce in Europe, just as, 20 years ago, we had a golden opportunity to become the financial centre of Europe. We realised that under the Conservative Government, and we are now Europe's financial centre. Indeed, we are one of the world's leading financial centres. With our English-speaking world contacts and our international outlook due to our history, the key event that virtually guaranteed that we would be Europe's financial centre was the fact that, in 1979, the Conservative Government abolished exchange controls. We deregulated: we opened up this country and this city, and it became a success story in the world of finance.

What are the Government doing? They are introducing new regulation in part I, and attacking the source of future potential—the people. They are attacking the people in IT through IR35. They will drive thousands of the most able people with IT skills out of the country, and they will drive them out over a petty tax point. We want them not to spend the money that they are earning, but to accumulate it in their businesses and invest it in the future of e-commerce.

There is no comparison between someone who works in IT, earning many thousands of pounds, and someone who is an employee with all the rights and guarantees that are granted to such employees, whether that person is working in a hospital, in a school or in any other profession. Those people's jobs are on the line every day. They are negotiating for new contracts with new companies; they do not know where their bread will be buttered in two years, or one year, or, sometimes, one month. What they do know is that, if they can retain the earnings in the companies that they have set up, they can invest those earnings to enable their businesses to grow, and to ensure that this country takes the opportunity to become a centre for e-commerce in Europe.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the hon. Gentleman accept from someone who employed an awful lot of contractors in his time that, relatively, most have exactly the same rights and privileges as company employees? They are usually taken on because companies do not wish to show head counts on their accounts. There are mechanisms for avoiding costs to large companies, which have been passed on to those people. They will continue to work in this country and contribute to the IT industry even after the change.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I have no doubt that some people involved in providing IT services to companies will stay here after the implementation of IR35, but those who have the most opportunity, who are the most able, and who have the most need to retain earnings and investment to develop their businesses and the potential of e-commerce are those who will go elsewhere. It is a fast-moving environment. No one can afford to give up a competitive advantage, or to give in to what the Government are doing. The Government are telling them that they are merely employees, but in fact they are entrepreneurs at the forefront of what should be a golden opportunity.

Dr. Palmer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ms Hewitt *rose—*

Mr. St. Aubyn: I want to develop my point, but I will give way to the Minister, for whom I have a great deal of respect.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he would care to tell us whether he endorses the advice given by at least one computing magazine to some IT sub-contractors to take from their earnings no more than just over £4,000 in the current tax year, and to take the rest in dividend payments, thus avoiding any national contributions on all their income. Does the hon. Gentleman support tax-dodging of that kind?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am sure that the Minister would not wish to describe a perfectly legitimate exercise as tax-dodging. If she wants to prevent or discourage companies from implementing such a dividend policy, let her by all means introduce a specific rule to deal with that point, but people in the world of providing services should not be prevented from setting up companies and accumulating capital to develop bigger and more successful businesses, which is what the Minister's Government have managed to do in a cumbersome, clumsy way in introducing IR35.

Dr. Palmer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. St. Aubyn: No, I will take no further interventions.

The Bill is not about IR35; it is about e-commerce. Speaking to a group of Members of Parliament last week in the environs of the House, the managing director of Unilever, Mr. Richard Greenhaugh, said:

"We need an internet that is allowed to grow rapidly with competition restraints which are minimal."

The problem with the Bill is that the competition restraints may be very real and very large.

It is not good enough for the Minister to tell us that the powers in part I of her Bill are reserve powers. We have seen the same Jekyll and Hyde trick from the Government before: they have tried to present two faces at once. We know that tonight the Minister has drunk from the bottle by her bed marked "light touch", but we also know that there is another bottle marked "regulation potion". We are very worried about when and where she will drink from that bottle and come back to the House with a very different look in her eye. We fear that she may announce, without sufficient debate, without a further Bill, and without proper consultation, that she will take a sledgehammer to this business and, in effect, drive it off our shores.

The problem with the light touch and with self-regulation is that they require strong nerves. In the fast-moving world of e-commerce, there will be occasions when people make mistakes and things go wrong. It will be easy at that time for the Minister to come to the House and to justify part I, saying that she is going to enact it. That will probably be the wrong thing to do.

There were occasions in the 1980s and 1990s when financial institutions were in trouble. They made losses. Indeed, on one or two occasions, taxpayers' money was used to prevent those losses from getting even worse, but let us compare that with the position in countries that had far more heavily regulated financial sectors. They had just as many problems. The difference was that taxpayers had to foot a much bigger bill to put them right because their Governments had said at the outset that they were responsible for ensuring that nothing would go wrong. When it did, billions of pounds, or rather billions of dollars and tens of billions of francs were spent to try to redress the mistakes of Government, not just of businesses. The danger of regulation in such a new sphere is that the Government will find that it is underwriting activities that they do not understand and cannot control until it is too late and until taxpayers' money has been taken for a ride.

Part I depends on decisions by Ministers, yet we heard criticism after criticism by the Minister of her Department just months before the Government came to office. Why is she so confident that, under her management, the Department of Trade and Industry will always get it right in the sphere of information technology and e-commerce, when she has told us how wrong its original proposals on encryption were in 1997, a point with which we agree?

Ms Hewitt: In case anyone might be misled by what the hon. Gentleman is saying, let me make the position clear. I was criticising the policy of Ministers in the previous Government. As a Minister, I take responsibility for policy decisions. As the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), a former Minister, said earlier, my officials have always done an excellent job and, I am certain, will continue to do so. I was complaining about the policy decisions of the previous Government.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The policy of the previous Government just before the election was to issue a document for consultation and to come back with legislation. The Minister's policy is to introduce the clauses before there is any need for them and before there can be meaningful consultation about the need for part I.

Ministers do sometimes make mistakes. Our Front-Bench team has been big enough to admit that our first thoughts on the subject two and a half years ago, when the development e-commerce was a small cloud on the horizon, may have been somewhat askew. We have learned the full lesson from that mistake. The Minister and her Department have only half learned it. If they had learned the full lesson, they would never have come before the House tonight with part I.

We know about the saga in the summer with the Lord Chancellor. He gave the green light to the Brussels convention that will kill much of e-commerce's potential in Europe. If, under the convention, a business here with a customer in another European Union state were subject to the law of that state when it struck a deal over the net, that would stop it doing business with large parts of Europe. Many businesses that are happy to receive customers from Italy, Greece and other countries would think twice if they thought that the terms of contract that they had agreed would ultimately be determined by a law in Italy or Greece, rather than by one in this country. That is not to be a little Englander, but to reflect on this country's immense reputation, to which the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) alluded, for having the highest possible integrity when it comes to our system of law.

Another reason why we could become a centre for e-commerce if there is a sane system of developing the law of contract in Europe is that when people around Europe decide that they want to enter an agreement, they will want to do it under English law because they know that it will be fair to all sides. That is a good reason why we stand an excellent chance of developing a centre for e-commerce.

That will not happen if ideas such as the Brussels convention come into force. The Lord Chancellor was perfectly happy for the convention to proceed. Such misjudgments suggest that part I might be allowed to proceed on the wrong grounds and with the wrong judgment through an agreement by the Minister or one of her colleagues in the near future.

Mr. Ruffley: Has my hon. Friend wondered, as I have, whether the Minister was even notified that the Lord Chancellor's Department was going to take such action?

Mr. St. Aubyn: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Minister owes it to the House to answer it. In the so-called joined-up Government, was there anything joined-up about the decision making of the Lord Chancellor's Department? Did the Lord Chancellor consult with the Department of Trade and Industry beforehand? If he did, can the Minister confirm that she agreed to his decision? What does that tell us about her competence and that of her officials in managing these important matters?

Dr. Palmer: I do not necessarily disagree with the hon. Gentleman's view that the jurisdiction should be that of the vendor, but does he agree that there is a dilemma? It is conceivable that a medium-sized firm, a large firm or a member of an industry association would feel able to deal with customers with a reasonable familiarity of the law in other countries, but it is barely conceivable that the ordinary consumer will feel comfortable with operating under the law in other countries. The logic of the hon. Gentleman's argument is that, if somebody in Greece buys something from a British company or somebody in Britain buys something from a Greek company, they must in principle be willing to accept whatever rules prevail in the other country.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I do not have a crystal ball, but I believe that the trade between countries will be primarily between businesses. Consumers will look to firms in their own country, albeit on a website rather than in a high street shop. The hon. Gentleman's point may prove to be pretty arcane.

According to figures supplied by DHL, e-commerce was worth $45 billion in 1998 and the latest projections suggest that it will reach $1.3 trillion by 2003. That is five years ahead of the projections made by the DTI committee only a few months ago. The scene is changing very rapidly. The sector is dynamic and it has tremendous potential.

DHL also pointed out that the cachet of the "Made in Britain" label will be very strong. If the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) is right and people are hesitant

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about dealing outside their own jurisdiction, they might still be prepared to deal with products made in this country under contracts made in this country, because our legal system has such an excellent record of fairness to those who come to this country from outside.

Another factor is that we are very wired. The latest thorough survey shows that 40 per cent. of adults in the UK have access to the net. It is estimated that in the past month alone, 20 per cent. of all adults in this country used the net. The greatest usage is among two groups. Some 70 per cent. of 16 to 24-year-olds are on-line. The other day, I was visiting the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service headquarters in Cheltenham, where I was told that its reference bible for college courses will be a virtual manual from next year. There will not be a printed version. Everyone who wants to sign up for a college or university course will go through the net to UCAS. They will find an excellent site, where they can state their area of interest. The search engine will deliver to them all the colleges with the courses that they are looking for.

If they want to find out what sort of character is going to go to that university or college, they can call down from the database a map of Britain, showing the proportion of students coming from each part of the country. There is tremendous power in this new technology, and UCAS is at the forefront of it.

Some 70 per cent. of graduates are on-line. I am not asking the Labour party to buy the trickle-down theory, but these groups are the leaders and shakers in society and will be the spearheads of a much-wider usage. We do not need to have angst about how many people use the net today. Anyone can drop in to a net café in the high street and get access or an e-mail address for nothing from one of the providers. This is an accessible medium already.

As a country, we are good at taking on new technology. We have a great deal more success with mail order magazines selling new ideas than other countries in Europe. However, according to the last estimate, our consumers are two years behind those of the United States. I visited the US a month ago, and people can talk about nothing other than e-commerce; it gets a bit tiresome after a while. Nevertheless, one got the sense that consumers over there are getting plugged in. Although we are behind, it will be less than two years before this country reaches the stage that America is at today.

Britain has a golden opportunity. We have the will, the potential, the background, the reputation and the skills. We also have a driving need. The downside of e-commerce is that the world of financial services—which has brought so much prosperity to this country and this city—will be shrunk by e-commerce. Many of the services carried out today in the City of London will not exist in five years—certainly within ten years. There may be just one financial centre, if there is any need at all for a financial centre in the world. If so, it certainly would be New York.

We need something to replace the financial services economy that has motored our economy and made us all richer in the past two decades. We must not only aspire to become a centre of e-commerce. We must become a centre of e-commerce if we are to fulfil the potential of the economy. That potential was the golden legacy of the previous Government, and tonight, the Minister yet again is putting it under threat by her measures, which will impose regulation and restrictions on the power and dynamism of the British people.

8.53 pm

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): I wish to declare a mini-interest. I am the keynote speaker at a number of conferences on electronic commerce and its regulation. It has not happened yet, but eventually I may be paid for one or two of them.

There is a huge world market to be facilitated by legislation such as this. I will not repeat the statistics given by other hon. Members, except to note that the total number of internet users expected next year is 250 million, which is larger than the population of the United States. If one considers the attraction to a business of marketing itself to the entire American population, and then considers that this market is a larger opportunity, one can see why any business must get into this area.

The industry has given a broad welcome to the salient points of the Bill, and we are all familiar with aspects of it that were not popular. It is generally accepted that reasonable compromises have been made, and there is little appetite for delay at this point. Opposition Members gave reasons for that, which sits oddly with the rather mysterious reasoned amendment, which appears to suggest that legislation should not proceed until we have had a chance to study the interaction with European directives that are not yet entirely clear. If we were to make the amendment, it would not be possible to proceed and we would have to delay, with all the adverse consequences mentioned by both Government and Opposition Members.

It is crucial for any business, political organisation or Government dealing with the internet not merely to recreate the existing ways of working but to adapt them to the new situation. Similarly, we need to adapt the legislation. It is a broadly accepted truism that legislation on-line should be the same in most situations as legislation off-line.

That was agreed by the G8 as one of the principles and has been quoted rather glibly in many contexts, but there will be situations in which it is profoundly difficult, because if we want diverse national legislation to coincide with the equivalent on-line legislation we will require that on-line legislation differs in different countries. One of the Government's objectives should be, and I think is, to achieve sufficient convergence within European consumer protection and contract legislation to narrow the discrepancy between what is accepted in each country and what is accepted across the countries.

The Gartner group and others have worked out that there are 40,000 mentions of the words "signature" and "writing" in British legislation, and some have suggested that the Government should impose a timetable for perusing and, if necessary, correcting all those mentions, although it has not been made clear whether we should simply hold up our hands and give up if that timetable is not met.

I want to draw on the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) that we have quarterly reports from each Department on progress in implementing that mammoth

task of legislative revision. It should not be left to individual Ministers to pursue it as and when time is available.

The location problem often comes up. Some groups say that the difficulty of identifying where the seller and the buyer reside makes it extremely difficult to have any rules for internet commerce based on national jurisdiction. It is not clear what jurisdiction would apply to a virtual vendor floating in cyberspace. That is a genuine problem but perhaps not so great a one as has been maintained.

An elderly couple in Beeston in my constituency called me to say that they frequently had calls requesting phone sex. A Californian company that specialised in a sex website was advertising the services of girls based in Guyana. To dial Guyana from California, one uses the dialling code 01159 and if one dials that code in Britain, one gets Beeston and my constituents. I wrote an e-mail to the company and said that it was unlikely that my constituents would send it royalties and that it was losing business. Overnight, the company changed the website to give the correct dialling code from Britain.

That example shows how international internet commerce can hit the vendor in a way he had not expected, how it can hit the buyer in a way he had not expected and how it can hit third parties, who might barely have heard of the internet. If we add to that the possibility that it is not clear whether the website operators are in California, Guyana or Britain, the problem of jurisdiction becomes clear. However, in any contract between two genuine parties, neither of whom seeks to defraud the other, it should be possible to establish the jurisdiction without great difficulty.

As a basic principle for what is unattractively called the TrustUK mark, which will become the TrustEurope mark, I suggest that people who wish to benefit from the mark should state where they are located for the purposes of jurisdiction. As the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) suggested, people based in Germany, Honduras or Guyana might deem it desirable, for one reason or another, to base themselves in Britain for the purpose of jurisdiction—perhaps to appeal to British customers. That would be welcome.

If one of the parties seeks to defraud the other—for example, if the vendor is selling a product that does not exist or the buyer is seeking to get the product without paying for it—the indication of location may be false. That narrower problem can be specifically addressed by the police using credit companies to locate the true address of the person involved. Fraud is a specific case, and there is no need to wreck the whole principle of location and jurisdiction for that alone.

When we set the requirements for the TrustUK and TrustEurope kitemarks, I suggest that we say, first, that the location for which jurisdiction applies must be given; secondly, that if no location is given, the purchaser's location applies; and, thirdly, that it is an offence to give a false location.

I welcome the proposals and the industry as a whole, to take a realistic view of what has been said, is enthusiastic about part II. The industry is also willing to accept part I, because it recognises that it is a reasonable compromise and that the Government cannot altogether give up the possibility of legislation should self-regulation not be sufficient. I commend the Bill to the House and thank the Government for introducing it.

9.4 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): The internet has offered numerous small companies the opportunity for development. It has been the foundation for enterprise and, although originally developed from the seed of public sector investment, has been very much the epitome and the cutting edge of free enterprise in recent history. That needs saying because it is one of the foundations on which I tend to base any thinking about the impact of legislation in this area. Based on the track record, Government should keep as far away as possible from regulatory interference in that activity. I will judge the Bill against that criterion and, although I have some qualms about the first part, I think that it will pass that test.

The internet is a vital framework for productivity improvement and for simplifying the processes between all sections of the industrial supply chain. As a number of hon. Members have said, it is a critical tool for revolutionising the efficiency of many businesses in this country and internationally. Another attraction is that it provides an extremely low entry barrier to business start-up. That is one reason why it has been the epitome of small business enterprise development: developing from nothing, businesses can be sold on the stock market for astonishing amounts and then, quite often, they disappoint those who buy them.

What is needed to make the best of this? The first principle is for the Government to step back from involvement. That is a difficult task in this country, because we tend always to consider ways in which to regulate, control and direct. That is an instinct from which we must refrain in this sector. We have seen it in the Bill's development; I commend the Government on the long consultation process. The publication of a draft Bill, careful consideration of Select Committee recommendations on two occasions and a good deal of interest in what the industry said have all helped to shape a Bill that is far better than it otherwise would have been. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) on that. When the Bill was initially mooted, my ability to enter the Lobby to vote for it would have been tested, but that is not the case now.

Another key issue is to regard the Bill as being about information and people, not technology. When I was an IT director, I had constantly to persuade people that their obsession with how something would be solved technically should not occupy their time. The key issues were: what information did they need, and how were the people who would use that information to be trained and helped to use it most effectively? We could find solutions to the technology—that was not much of a problem. The difficulty was having the imagination to conceive the human solutions of organising a business to take full advantage of what was available. Some of the contributions to the debate have contained interesting digressions into technological aspects, but I do not believe that they are the foundations of electronic commerce in this country; they are not critical benchmarks for its success.

What else do we need? Trust and security have been mentioned as key criteria. We cannot ever have absolute trust and security—they can only be relative. My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet ran through the criteria to consider when using a credit card. One could apply the same rules when buying over the telephone. How do we judge the difference between those two

[Mr. Mark Todd]

purchases? We do not know the person at the other end—he or she might record our credit card details and misuse them, or store them in an inappropriate place and abuse them. Those factors run through people's minds but they have gradually become used to the idea.

People are often driven by their trust in a brand name. That point has been made several times in this debate, and rightly so. A brand name, to me, is one of the critical indicators of trust. That is tough on small businesses, which must sell their products by other means, such as innovation, the excitement of their marketing message and strategic alliances with other businesses that can offer that trust. It is a natural instinct for customers to look for something that they can trust. That is one of the reasons why some websites are more successful at attracting people than others.

We also need flexibility. In that regard, the Bill qualifies for some solid applause. A good deal of reliance is placed on the opportunity to pass secondary legislation in due course, if that proves necessary. Normally, one would be suspicious of that approach, but in this instance it is absolutely essential and necessary. It would be demanding too much to require that time be found for more primary legislation in the future. Sensibly, the Bill gives Ministers a variety of powers to produce regulations to cover all aspects of the matter, and that is the wisest approach. The principle of flexibility has been adopted in the Bill.

Leadership by the Government is vital, as the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) noted earlier. The Government have recognised the need for a strategy on information technology, and that is an innovation in this country. No such strategy has existed here before—a woeful omission that has led to some of the appalling IT failures of the past couple of years and before.

A clear grasp of how to organise the delivery of information technology requires that there be a relationship with Government policies, as an IT strategy must be founded on what we are attempting to put together for and deliver to our citizens. Moreover, the strategy must be founded on processes, rather than on Government Departments. The important thing is the way in which information flows across activities, rather than how it is channelled through departmental funnels. An IT strategy must be focused on citizens and not on civil servants, and on freedoms rather than restrictions.

Those are the criteria against which I shall judge the strategy when it emerges, but I welcome the commitment to produce such a strategy, which will be the foundation for effective electronic commerce in Government. That is one of the key areas: it must be possible to conduct transactions with our Government by electronic means, and the Bill sets targets for that. It states that 50 per cent. of dealings with the Government should be delivered by electronic means by 2005, and 100 per cent. by 2008.

If I were to set the benchmark in that regard, I would judge performance in terms of the reduction in all dealings with the Government. The Bill sets target dates by which certain proportions of the various Government functions should be dealt with by electronic means, but we should be ensuring that the processes of Government are made so much more efficient that it will no longer be true to say that the same information can be found in 130 different places in the Government structure. We should be able to change a piece of information at one stroke, rather than through multiple contacts. That benchmark is not contained in the Bill, but it is a critically important foundation for success.

It is clear that core standards are needed, in data storage and in the methodology by which we choose to develop systems. The foundations are still being built, but they will determine how successful we will be in delivering electronic commerce at Government level.

That we must work towards international agreement has been stressed several times in the debate and I shall not dwell on the point. However, I recall from my university days the concept of socialism in one country, and we are in danger of developing electronic commerce in one country—a rather short-term achievement. We must lay the foundations for effective trade across international boundaries.

We also need a realistic and proportionate approach to the regulatory process. That again depends on the Government having a light touch in assessing the risk of something going wrong and the need for intervention.

I have listed the key elements that we must get right. By and large, the Bill is a commendable shot at a fast-moving target. The British instinct for control and regulation has largely been restrained, and I commend the Bill to the House.

9.14 pm

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): I am pleased to be called in this debate; I apologise to the House for not being present earlier. Sadly, I had to attend the funeral of my good friend Councillor Arnie Holt. I beg the House's indulgence if I cover points made by previous speakers. I will try not to dwell on the Bill's technical aspects, which have been adequately covered, and address instead some of its wider social and educational implications.

Of the 28 Bills announced in the Queen's Speech, the Electronic Communications Bill was listed first. While its key provisions relate to e-commerce, which I expect has been the focus of this debate, its title is right because it is not just about commerce and how the United Kingdom can and should be the global leader in electronic business but about communication, the spread of knowledge and enabling the development of society in general.

Like other hon. Members who have spoken, I have a keen interest in information, communication and enabling technologies, or ICE-T as I refer to them. I have an Industry and Parliament Trust fellowship with IBM and am a member of PITCOM, the parliamentary information technology committee. With PITCOM, I have travelled to France, Canada and Japan to report on how other countries, and particularly their Governments, are harnessing new technologies for the benefit of their citizens.

I am enthused, excited and passionate not about the new technologies but about what they can and will do to assist people and enhance their lives. I am not a techie or a geek but I am very definitely a people person. I can see the opportunities and widened horizons that the new technology can deliver for people in my constituency and throughout the UK—not only opportunities for their businesses but for their education and the better delivery of local authority and Government services.

My constituency is, to use census jargon, under-represented in the professional, managerial and technical social groups. I want the benefits of information, communication and enabling technologies to be available to all my constituents, not only those who own their own companies or who can afford a computer at home.

I welcome Government moves to allow public institutions such as schools, further education colleges, libraries and citizens advice bureaux to take advantage of lower rate internet access. That should allow groups such as the Salford forum for older people and the Eccles afternoon townswomen's guild, whom I met this week, access to information, both general and practical.

Three categories of transaction were defined in the Trade and Industry Committee report on e-commerce published in July: business to consumer transactions; business to business transactions; and citizen to Government transactions. The Committee reported that in the United States a fourth was found: consumer to consumer transactions, such as on-line auctions. With our local climate in Salford, they could be a welcome alternative to the early morning car boot sale. Much human activity, business, education and leisure is encompassed by this debate.

The Bill had a previous incarnation only a few months ago, since when the Government have consulted widely and amended their proposals. IBM, with which I have an IPT placement, commented:

"we're delighted that Ministers support an industry led approach to developing trust in emerging technologies and services. It's now down to industry to take forward its T-scheme"—

the industry voluntary scheme—

"initiative not only to meet e-commerce requirements in the UK but also to serve as a model for countries in Europe and worldwide."

In the north-west, we have been at the forefront of developments in information, communication and enabling technologies. I am the pilot MP involved in the GEMESIS—government, education, medical, industry, social information superhighway—project. It is based at Salford university and provides electronic commerce support to businesses across the north-west. As an integral part of GEMESIS, a virtual chamber of commerce, called the virtual chamber, or TVC, has been developed in conjunction with Manchester training and enterprise council, Manchester chamber of commerce and industry and Cable and Wireless. The chamber now has 140 subscribers.

Salford university plans to become a virtual university of industry for the north-west, with a special emphasis on the way in which open, distance and flexible learning can be used across a broad-band network to encourage small and medium-sized enterprises to become more innovative and wealth creating. In March, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry visited the GEMESIS project, and praised its ground-breaking work. He pointed out that such work should be disseminated throughout the country. The recent award of an extra £1.7 million for the project—including money from the European regional development fund—will help to make that a reality.

My local authority of Salford has its own information society Portal initiative, in partnership with Oracle, called "People not Technology", to ensure that the city council, its employees and the people of Salford have the opportunity to realise the potential of technological change—to make those technologies work for them and help to improve their lives. Developments include the introduction of a city-based in-house call centre—currently operating in the environmental services directorate. In the first months of operation, responsiveness improved by more than 75 per cent. Next month, a pilot one-stop shop will open—a multi-service site with a cyber café. Salford city council has the ambitious aim of meeting the targets that the Government have set for themselves for making services available electronically—100 per cent. by 2008. The council hopes to meet those targets early.

This evening, the *Manchester Evening News* carried an announcement that the university of Manchester institute of science and technology is to set up a virtual business school that will bring the country's best brains together under one virtual roof.

I am a regular visitor to the digital world centre at the Lowry centre at Salford Quays—one of the landmark millennium projects. The 50,000 sq ft high-tech building will provide an important showcase for Government IT initiatives. An informative exhibition on the ground floor will be open to the public free of charge. On the first floor, meeting facilities with international high-speed, broad-band connections will be available for SMEs and progressive British companies. The programmes will be directed by the Digital World society—a collaboration of leading global IT companies.

To establish the United Kingdom as a leader in the digital world, we should establish a national centre to house our digital assets, so that they can be accessed from all over the world. That could be achieved via the digital world centre at Salford Quays. The facility will be at the hub of a broad-band network infrastructure that stretches out to schools, libraries, community centres and businesses. The UK can become the leader in a high-speed internet that will deliver full motion video throughout the world.

Of course, I have trumpeted the achievements of my locality. However I am keen to ensure that all the important projects that I described work together to ensure effective delivery of our local, national and global strategies. I continually hear the polarised arguments as to strategies: some commentators claim that local strategies are more important than global ones, and vice versa. We need both local and global strategies—perhaps we should call them "glocal" strategies. What is important is that the strategies meet our objectives to encourage maximum access for all citizens; to promote and encourage research development and implementation; and to facilitate e-commerce with minimum, but appropriate, regulation such as that provided in the Bill.

Without thought-out strategies, local economies may lose out—not just by becoming B-roads off the information superhighway, but by following traditional methods of economic development that ignore new types of activity and alliance, and new modes of learning, emerging networks and communities. Measures to address social exclusion must be central to the e-commerce debate and strategy, as should the role of a broadly defined, non-statutory sector—the so-called third sector. That is why I support organisations such as Communities on Line and Tele Cities.

The progressive use of information, communication and enabling technologies and the internet forces us to develop new ways to work and co-operate together, to promote what

[Mr. Ian Stewart]

I call "co-opetition": the maximum co-operation between traditionally competing organisations and businesses so that they can work collaboratively towards achieving a common aim or goal—whether that be commercial, social or political.

I am delighted by the Government's bold commitment to make electronically available 25 per cent. of Government services by 2002, increasing to 100 per cent. by 2008. I am sure that other hon. Members have commented on the economic gains to the public sector of e-commerce. In September, an article in the magazine *Public Finance* reported on research undertaken by the IT consultancy Kable, which estimated that central and local government combined could be saving a staggering £4.1 billion a year within five years, by adopting e-commerce for services that involve financial transactions and by reducing procurement costs. That could be achieved with minimal investment.

The Bill, when implemented, will enable the UK to take its place as the best country in the world for the transaction of e-commerce. It will broaden the access for UK citizens to open up the internet. In this seemingly dry and very unglamorous Bill, we may even be at the start of remodelling our democracy. It will certainly allow us to embrace the future with confidence, commitment and creativity. People first, technology in support. I welcome the Bill.

9.26 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): We may start on a note of agreement. The debate has been excellent, with some high-quality and well informed speeches.

The development of e-commerce is crucial to the country's future wealth and prosperity. If we embrace, encourage and liberate e-commerce, enabling Britain to be seen as a haven for e-commerce entrepreneurs, there is the very real possibility that we shall deliver enormous opportunities for people in this country.

Throughout the debate, we have been told that there are 179 million on-line users, and that that figure is estimated to rise, next year, to 250 million and by 2005 to some 350 million. In cash terms, e-commerce was worth $12 billion in 1999. Its worth will grow to between $350 billion and $500 billion by 2002 and to a staggering $1,000 billion per annum by between 2003 and 2005.

Do we want Britain to be at the forefront of those developments or to be an also-ran? Do we, as a nation, want that prosperity or should we just see how it turns out? It is unfortunate for the future of e-commerce in Britain that, at this crucial time, we have a Labour Government. However new it claims to be, although new Labour speaks the rhetoric of enterprise and a free market and deregulation, using that language in its presentation, the reality is that of traditional Labour—suspicion of business, fear of the free market, and an instinct that is always to regulate.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Gibb: I give way to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller).

Mr. Miller: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will explain why, if there is a huge divide between the Labour party and business, I was able to quote a long and reasonably impressive list of support from companies such as Dell and Microsoft. My hon. Friend the Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) mentioned IBM. Why is their support given to Labour, not the Tory party?

Mr. Gibb: Well, it is given to the Tory party on this issue. Those companies are expressing a sigh of relief that, thanks to the Conservative Opposition, who opposed the initial drafts of the Bill, they now have a Bill that they feel able to support.

We saw the regulatory tendency in the early drafts of the Bill. It is the Conservatives who really understand how entrepreneurs work and enterprise flourishes. It was the Conservatives—

Mr. White: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gibb: Let me carry on; I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman later.

It is the Conservatives who understand enterprise, and it was Conservative shadow Ministers who insisted on the changes to the draft Bills that took out all the restrictions and burdens that would have killed a flourishing e-commerce sector stone dead.

In her press release, the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce says:

"This historic Bill will help make the UK the best place in the world to do electronic business. Britain led the world in the first industrial revolution. Now we are determined to be winners in the new knowledge economy revolution."

Britain succeeded in the industrial revolution, however, precisely because we had a laissez-faire economy by the international standards of the time. If the Government had wanted an industrial revolution in e-commerce, they should not have put in place the whole paraphernalia of state control that could come into effect under part I.

Mr. Miller: Does the hon. Gentleman not recall that the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), pointed out in his interesting contribution that the policy for mandatory key escrow came from the Conservative party?

Mr. Gibb: Yes, and during the consultation that was begun by my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton, we would have come to the conclusions that we have come to today. What is wrong with the Government is that, even after consultation, they publish Bills containing such paraphernalia. This Bill still allows for the possibility of huge state regulation.

The Government's own consultation exercise revealed deep unease in industry about these provisions. They create enormous uncertainties, so industry has called for them to be dropped altogether. Perhaps the Minister for Competitiveness could add some certainty to the issue by answering the question that the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce failed to answer properly in response to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan).

Paragraph 76 of the explanatory notes states:

"The Government will commence Part I and set up the statutory scheme, only if self-regulation does not work."

The Minister has 20 minutes to reply, so will he tell us how the Government will judge whether self-regulation does or does not work? What will the criteria be? Part I contains clauses 1 to 9, which make up 60 per cent. of the Bill. Whether part I comes into effect will depend on the answer to those questions.

The Secretary of State can implement the new regulatory regime without even a debate in the House. It can be done without any parliamentary approval whatever. That is surprising given the Government's expressed view that they always take on board Select Committee recommendations. In its report on the draft Bill, the Select Committee on Trade and Industry said:

"We are particularly concerned at the proposal that the order necessary to bring in part I of the Bill . . . should not be subject to any parliamentary procedure. We recommend that . . . Parliament should have the opportunity to debate and vote on the issue."

Why will there be no vote?

Will the Minister explain what is meant in clause 15 by an

"order made by statutory instrument"?

Will that statutory instrument be introduced according to the negative or affirmative resolution procedure, or will it be one that can be implemented solely by order?

In her press release, the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce said:

"We are determined to get e-commerce law right and get it in fast. That is why we are introducing this Bill in the same week as the Queen's Speech."

This Bill was introduced in last year's Queen's Speech, but it was not ready a year after that speech. Consequently, we have lost a year in the battle to make Britain a world haven for e-commerce. This Government, not the last one, are to blame for that.

One of the Government's defining features is their fear of confronting issues. That is why in almost all their Bills the meat of the legislation is not in the Bill, but in secondary legislation. Rarely, if ever, is that secondary legislation available before Second Reading. This 15-clause Bill contains regulatory powers in clause 2, which sets out the accreditation criteria, in clause 3, which is on the delegation of functions to an appointed individual, in clauses 5 and 8, which contain a host of regulatory powers to amend primary legislation, and in clause 10. Where are those regulations and why have the Government not published them in time for Second Reading? Will the Minister undertake that, apart from the host of regulations under clause 8, all the other regulations in the Bill will be ready by the time of the Committee stage?

We have had an interesting debate. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston pointed out that no one in the House really knows the extent of the internet's growth. He called it an asymptotic curve. He went on to say that all good trade works on the basis of trust, and of course he is right, but that is why it is not necessary to establish this hugely cumbersome statutory framework.

Mr. Ian Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gibb: No, because I am running out of time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton made an excellent, informed speech. I now know why his initials and his nickname are IT. He pointed out how long it has taken the Bill to gestate and said that it had made elephantine progress. He pointed out, with his usual insight, that Janet Street-Porter, who forecast no future for the internet, cannot count foresight among her many other undoubted qualities. My hon. Friend is right to point out that the uncertainty about whether internet service providers are mere carriers or are responsible for the content of the message is critical.

My hon. Friend gave us some EU intelligence from his friends at Directorate-General XV, which was very interesting, partly because we found out that he has friends at DG XV. He also urged the Government to show leadership and aim at higher targets than 50 per cent. of procurement by 2005. Why have the Government exempted Customs and Excise and the Revenue from the storage provisions in clause 8? Tax returns can be submitted by e-mail, but why cannot the measures in the Bill apply to record-keeping and deal with the requirement to keep books and records for six years?

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) was right to point out the need for continual consultation on these issues. There may be many companies in the IT sector today which did not even exist when the consultation process took place in March. That was also the view of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the important point about the fees that the statutory regulatory body can charge. There is nothing in the Bill that limits the level of those charges, and without such limits there is a risk that fees will become a form of taxation—or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) called it, stealth taxation—which has not been approved annually by the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds demanded a timetable for amending the legislation for other Departments, as provided for in clause 8. It is a pity that none of those regulations has been published at the time of the Second Reading debate. He pointed out, in an excellent speech, that it has taken two and a half years for the Government to introduce the Bill. He agreed with many hon. Members and the Law Society that part I is unnecessary. Like many other hon. Members, he alerted the House to the murky fee issue.

Dr. Ladyman *rose—*

Mr. Gibb: I shall not give way because I want to finish in a couple of minutes.

Ministers must give the House some indication of what the level of fees will be. Will the Minister agree to a cap on those fees? Will he answer those questions today or in Committee?

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds is right to demand a timetable for the publication of the whole raft of regulations demanded by the Bill, and those regulations should be published soon. Finally, he alerted the House to the danger of differential fees for those who struggle with IT or who need a course such as "computing for the terrified", which my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) said is available in his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury is the only member of the Select Committee who is present today—the others are in Sweden. He raised a number of important questions, including the implementation dates for the

[Mr. Gibb]

various elements of the Bill. He expressed concern about the e-envoy or tsar, a post which seems to be turning into a virtual appointment.

Turning to the speech by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter), I must say that I am delighted that Liberal Democrat Front-Bench Members agree with us that part I is unnecessary and should be deleted from the Bill. I hope to see Liberal Members in the Lobby with us this evening.

The hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) complained that e-mail is not being used by as many businesses in the eastern region as in London. She gave the figures of 57 per cent. of firms and 81 per cent. of firms respectively. If she knew her constituency businesses better, she would find that the e-mail usage in Stevenage is almost as high as in London.

The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt), in a Clicksure contribution, agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury and others that part III is a bolt-on and needs wider consultation. The hon. Gentleman gave an interesting demonstration of the latest mobile phone technology, but he fails to understand that trust on the internet is better achieved by voluntary regulation than by heavy-handed legislation.

The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) spoke of the law being behind the times in respect of computer technology, but in the same breath said that he was one of the few Members of Parliament who is seriously worried about the prospect of self-regulation. In a powerful speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) pointed out that it was the ending of exchange controls in 1979 that liberated the City of London and enabled it to become the financial centre of Europe. A similarly deregulated approach, rather than the over-regulated approach set out in part I, is what is needed if Britain is to become the e-commerce centre of Europe.

The Government have missed an opportunity to create a light-touch legal regime that would have made this country a world leader in e-commerce enterprise. The Bill is late and it is flawed. The Conservatives have successfully forced the Government to remove part III of the draft Bill. We will now have to work hard in Committee to remove part I and limit the Government's regulating instinct.

If we are successful and the Government accept our amendments, we have every chance of making Britain a world leader in the e-commerce sector. The Conservative approach demonstrates our understanding of the modern world of e-commerce and global competition. For the sake of the industry, I hope that the Government will accept our amendments in Committee.

9.41 pm

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): I agree with the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) that this has been a fascinating debate. Listening to it has been a humbling experience. A friend told me that replying to the debate would be as easy as falling off an analogue, but it is not, mainly because of the expertise and knowledge displayed by hon. Members on both sides of the House—albeit mostly Labour Members, I am happy to say.

Before I reply to as many of the detailed points raised as I can, I shall remind the House of the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce. The Bill, appropriately introduced in the last Parliament of the millennium, is central to the modernising theme of the Government's legislative programme. Modernising the law to ensure that our economy prospers in the information revolution is a huge task, but one to which we are committed. We are equally determined to create a modern Britain for the new millennium; that involves modernising government itself. In short, we are determined to create a legal and a business environment to make the UK the best place in the world to conduct electronic business.

The speeches of Opposition Members carried us into the virtual reality—indeed, the parallel universe—they occupy. At the fag-end of their 18 years in government, the Conservatives issued a consultation document that proposed mandatory key escrow and a mandatory regulation scheme; yet, today, they attempt to delay the legislation by tabling an amendment in which they suggest that the Government are over-regulating the industry.

In a thoughtful speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) referred to problems in respect of electronic signatures, as did the spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter). Incidentally, the Liberal Democrats are sitting on a virtual fence, waiting for the Government reply before deciding which way to vote. I assure both hon. Members that the Bill does not include any presumption as to whether or not a particular electronic signature is valid. It does not change the balance of proof between the consumer and suppliers: the courts will decide on the effects of a signature based on the evidence before them, just as they do today in respect of normal signatures.

The Opposition's virtual reality was momentarily illuminated by the speech of the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), who is one of those who has a profound knowledge of the subject. The hon. Gentleman was kind enough to send me a note telling me that he was unable to be present for the winding-up speeches. He was extremely supportive of the Bill—indeed, he recanted the provisions of the document issued by the previous Conservative Government. However, in response to the points he raised, I repeat the assurance that we shall not insist on key escrow—indeed, clause 13 specifically prevents that. Orders are made under clause 8 to allow electronic communication where existing laws require paper. If providers want to offer key escrow services and people want to use them, that is entirely up to them; the Government do not intend to interfere.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton referred to independent service providers' concerns that they may be held liable for material transmitted where they have neither knowledge of its illegality nor control over its transmission. He supports the need for legal certainty. The draft EU electronic commerce directive prohibits member states from imposing a general obligation on independent service providers to monitor the information that they transmit or store and proposes exemptions from liability for illegal content for intermediaries although it does not prevent the imposition of monitoring requirements in specific cases. We shall continue to work hard with the

industry to ensure that the general issue of liability is got right in the European Union electronic commerce directive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) referred to credit cards in another thoughtful speech. We recognise the difficulties experienced by small companies in obtaining merchant status for handling credit card transactions on-line. It is a significant barrier to the widespread adoption of e-commerce. Together with Treasury colleagues, my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce is working with Don Cruickshank's banking review to find a solution to this problem.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East referred, as did many other hon. Members, to the cost of self-regulation and consultation. I assure my hon. Friend that fees under a statutory scheme or under the self-regulation scheme will be based on the cost of assessment and the scale of operation. This will ensure that smaller companies will not be penalised. I also give the assurance that there will be on-going dialogue between the scheme and the Government. The proposals that I have seen include a Government representative on the executive board.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) made a fascinating contribution to the debate. He was released from having to tour Sweden with the rest of the members of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. I thought that he had gone off to Stockholm but I see him in his place. He is a Conservative Member who has some knowledge of the fundamental issues. The hon. Gentleman drew our attention to the unanimous recommendation of the Select Committee. Given that the Opposition are saying that part I is entirely unnecessary, I remind the House that the Select Committee said that it acknowledged the need for some sort of accreditation scheme for trust service providers to persuade potential users of electronic commerce that it was as safe and reliable as traditional forms of commerce but questioned whether such a scheme needed to be statutory. It recommended that the Government take powers to establish a statutory-backed scheme but hold them in reserve unused unless and until it was demonstrated that a voluntary scheme had failed to protect the interests of all consumers and service providers.

Mr. Duncan: The Minister has been asked on about five occasions what the criteria will be by which he will judge whether a statutory scheme is necessary: what are they?

Mr. Johnson: Hold steady.

The hon. Member for Banbury drew our attention to the Select Committee's recommendation, and it relates specifically to what we are doing today. We listened to the Committee and we are implementing its recommendations. The hon. Gentleman talked about the timing of bringing clause 7 into force. As he will know, it is normal to leave at least two months after Royal Assent before making a commencement order. We intend that there will be no further delay beyond that.

Mr. Duncan: What are the criteria?

Mr. Johnson: When I come to the criteria, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be extremely satisfied with my response.

The hon. Member for Banbury referred to the significant minority procedure and the mechanism for making deregulatory licence modifications as laid out in part III. As stated by my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce in her opening speech, the Government will bring forward amendments so that the significant minority procedure can be dropped from the Bill. The remaining deregulatory mechanism would allow fast-track licence modifications to remove regulatory burdens only if stringent tests were met.

The hon. Gentleman also raised a point about the e-envoy, a point which was also raised by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton. I assure hon. Members that Alex Allen is not a virtual appointment. He was appointed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in September. Although he is still in Australia he is already spending time on e-business issues. He will pick up the reins full-time in January and among other duties will be responsible for implementing the recommendations in the PIU—performance and innovation unit –report on electronic commerce.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) raised the matter of international activity. We are supporting activity through the EU, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations to develop common standards, but if we wait for such standards to be finalised, we will be the last to benefit. We want to lead, and we believe that self-regulation offers a flexible way of doing that.

In a fascinating contribution with props provided, my hon. Friend also asked about voice signature. I can reassure him that voice signature is indeed an electronic signature, within the terms of our Bill.

The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) referred to ideas for carve-out—another example of terminology—which would permit the electronic alternative to paper to be introduced across the board, with some exceptions. As it stands, the Bill adopts a case-by-case approach, but we are already studying the hon. Gentleman's idea and we expect to have more to say about it in Committee.

Clause 8 does provide the power to charge different fees for electronic and paper transactions, and there is no question of the Government pocketing the savings, but we will need to consider the position of the socially excluded. The Bill is flexible and Ministers may view their areas of responsibility differently. No doubt we will return to the point in Committee.

While I have time, let me draw attention to the criteria being set for regulation. [HON. MEMBERS: "Aha!"] This should be no surprise to Opposition Members. We published a detailed set of criteria in July. Do they not read such documents? It was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce when she introduced the debate.

The document states:

"The Government believes any scheme should have the following characteristics:

The scheme should be wide enough to cover a broad range of services including signature and confidentiality services.

The scheme should be demonstrably rigorous, impartial and trusted by all sectors of industry . . . It should not act as a barrier to new entrants to the market"—

[Mr. Johnson]

that was one of the suggestions that we heard from the Opposition—

"The scheme should have a means of taking into account the views of consumers.

The scheme needs effective mechanisms for ensuring compliance with these standards"—

including a number of examples set out in the report. Finally:

"The scheme should take account of the draft EU Electronic Signatures Directive . . . In particular, it should provide UK providers with a means of showing that their signature service meets the standards envisaged in the draft directive".

Those criteria have been published, they are clear to the industry and they have been repeated for the benefit of the Opposition.

I do not have time to refer in detail to all the other contributions, but they were fascinating. In a shameless bid for a place on the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) made one of the most thoughtful contributions. He described his experience of working in the industry over a number of years, and I am sure that we all benefited from hearing his comments. He pointed out that the wording of clause 7 is technologically neutral, which ensures that developments in new technology will not affect the provisions of the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) pointed out what a godsend the internet is to women who have family responsibilities and work unsocial hours, especially at this time of the year. In another thoughtful contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) welcomed the Bill. He was enthusiastic about part II and recognised the need for reserve powers in part I. My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) supported the Bill, and commended the extensive consultation and the changes that we made to the Bill as a result of that.

Those are all Members whose knowledge of these matters far exceeds mine. They contributed to an immensely informed debate.

The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton asked about the procedure for a commencement order under part I. There is no provision in the Bill for alternative or negative procedure for the commencement order. That is in accordance with normal procedure for such statutory instruments.

Mr. Gibb *rose—*

Mr. Johnson: I do not have time to give way.

The situation in respect of the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise will be dealt with under the Finance Act 1999, not under the Bill.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Johnson: I am not giving way. We hope that part I will not be brought into force, so there is no need to present draft statutory instruments yet. We shall report on progress on self-regulation. Clause 8 orders have to cover many Acts and we intend to propose some alternative structure.

Mr. Duncan *rose—*

Mr. Johnson: I will not give way.

I do not need to emphasise the importance of our proposals; hon. Members have done that during the debate. There may be differences in our views, but we all agree that trust and confidence are essential. Therefore, it is bizarre that the Opposition amendment tries to prevent the establishment of that trust. The industry would not develop a self-regulatory scheme for trust service providers if it believed that that would damage its prospects.

Mr. Duncan *rose—*

Mr. Johnson: I am not giving way. We are adopting the unanimous recommendation of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry and the hon. Member for Esher and Walton—I am pleased that he has resumed his seat—recanted on Opposition proposals. I shall remind the House of the industry's views. Microsoft says that the publication of the Bill

"provides a model for the rest of Europe to follow."

Keith Chapple, the managing director of Intel UK, said:

"We are delighted that government has confirmed in the Bill that key-escrow is off the agenda and is focusing on the real issue of legal recognition of electronic signatures".

Carl Symon, chief executive officer of IBM said:

"IBM welcomes the introduction of this important measure and hopes that it will become law very early in the new Millennium."

Keith Todd, the chief executive of ICL plc said:

"This is good news . . . This new sense of partnership between industry and Government"—

he refers specifically to part I—

"will make the UK a great place for electronic commerce."

The list continues with Cisco Systems, AOL and BT, which said:

"BT supports the government aim of creating an environment of trust and confidence in UK e-commerce. Legal recognition of digital signatures and writing on a non-discriminative basis, is an important step in this procedure."

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): We have received conflicting advice on clause 15. The Minister said that there would be no statutory instrument whereas his colleague said that a statutory instrument would be introduced. Will the Minister clarify that?

Mr. Johnson: I said that we would follow the usual procedure, but we cannot say now whether the negative or the positive resolution procedure will be used.

Today's debate will not be the last in which we discuss electronic issues. We all agree about the importance of the electronic revolution and our need to embrace it. It touches all our lives. Indeed, many schoolchildren are probably more adept than us at dealing with the technologies and thus better placed than politicians to discuss their potential.

The Bill could be the first measure to become law in the 21st century. Although it will not transform our lives overnight, it makes an important start on the transformation that will happen in the future and I commend it to the House.

Mr. Gibb: By leave of the House—

Hon. Members: No.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 128, Noes 319.

Division No. 5] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and
Mr. Oliver Heald.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John

Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS BILL
[*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Electronic Communications Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State for or in connection with the carrying out of his functions under the Act; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums so payable out of money so provided under any other Act; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

ESTIMATES

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 145(2)(Liaison Committee),

That this House agreed with the Report [23rd November] of the Liaison Committee.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT (CHRISTMAS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 25 (Periodic adjournments),

That this House, at its rising on Tuesday 21st December, do adjourn till Monday 10th January 2000.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday, 21st December, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until she have notified the Royal Assent to Acts agreed upon by both Houses.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Maria Eagle be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Mr. Nigel Griffiths and Mr. Jim Murphy be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Dentists

That the draft Dental Auxiliaries (Amendment) Regulations 1999, which were laid before this House on 2nd November, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

Justices of the Peace

That the draft Maximum Number of Stipendiary Magistrates Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 3rd November, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

Taxation and Financial Services

That this House takes note of European Union Documents Nos. 8484/1/99, the second progress report from the ECOFIN Council to the European Council on reinforced tax policy co-operation, 6615/98, a draft Directive on a common system of taxation applicable to interest and royalty payments, 8781/98, and draft Directive to ensure a minimum of effective taxation of savings income within the Community, and 8329/99, a Commission Communication on the action plan for implementing the framework for financial markets; supports the Government's objective of amending the draft Savings Directive to ensure the competitiveness of EU financial markets, including the City of London, are not damaged, through securing among other things an exemption for eurobonds and other similar instruments; and welcomes the Commission's efforts to develop further the single market in financial services.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Madam Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to Committees.

Ordered,

Agriculture

That Mr. Richard Livsey be discharged from the Agriculture Committee and Mr. Lembit Öpik be added to the Committee.

Catering

That Rosemary McKenna be discharged from the Catering Committee and Mr. Gerald Bermingham be added to the Committee.

Defence

That Mr. John McWilliam be discharged from the Defence Committee and Mr. Mike Gapes be added to the Committee.

Education and Employment

That Yvette Cooper, Mr. John Healey, Mrs. Eleanor Laing and Mr. Malcolm Wicks be discharged from the Education and Employment Committee and Mr. Michael Foster (Worcester), Mr. Stephen O'Brien, Mr. Ian Pearson and Mr. Barry Sheerman be added to the Committee.

Health

That Julia Drown be discharged from the Health Committee and Mrs. Eileen Gordon be added to the Committee.

Scottish Affairs

That Mr. John McAllion, Ms Sandra Osborne and Mr. David Stewart be discharged from the Scottish Affairs Committee and Mr. Russell Brown, Mr. Mohammed Sarwar and Mr. Bill Tynan be added to the Committee.

Social Security

That Kali Mountford, Mr. Chris Pond and Ms Debra Shipley be discharged from the Social Security Committee and Mr. Andy King and Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd West) be added to the Committee.

Treasury

That Jacqui Smith be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Mr. James Plaskitt be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. John McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

Liverpool (Regeneration)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

10.15 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Liverpool's urban renaissance is under way. It is seen most clearly in the city centre, which has been identified in the north-west economic strategy as the engine of growth for both city and region. That is despite the shadow cast by the speculating and exploitative Walton group plc, which has stifled regeneration by acquiring key city centre sites, securing public sector grant, yet failing to develop.

The Walton group stands guilty of impeding commercial growth, blighting the old post office site, Exchange Flags and now, in bizarre and unacceptable circumstances, Chavasse park, leaving Liverpool without a flagship millennium project and costing the city more than £200 million of committed investment, which has now been withdrawn.

I thank the Minister for authorising an inquiry into the group's questionable acquisition of £4.5 million of public money, paid between 1992 and 1994 to regenerate Exchange Flags. At the end of 1999, that building remains largely empty. The group is increasing its wealth through capital appreciation of its undeveloped properties, while Liverpool has been sold short. The group's activities are against the public interest. It has committed a fraud on the city of Liverpool. I ask for an assurance that the inquiry will be thorough and determined.

Regeneration must address economic, social, physical and environmental aspects of urban decline. Much progress has been made in Liverpool. City centre successes include the £90 million Queen's square Neptune development, including one of Liverpool's new four-star hotels, cultural, retail and office facilities; and the imaginative multi-million pound brownfield regeneration in Everton, led by Hope university college, transforming a derelict area into a place of higher and further education opportunities, linked with housing and shopping.

There has been a significant increase in inner-city housing. Since 1991, there has been nearly a 300 per cent. increase in people living in inner-city Liverpool. Regeneration of the Hope street quarter is under way as one of the city's major cultural areas.

Much has been done to realise the economic potential of Liverpool's thriving arts sector. The Government have given a lifeline to the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society and to the theatres in Liverpool. Nationally, the arts are the fastest growing sector producing employment.

Examples of new developments in Liverpool include the imaginative FACT—Foundation for Arts and Cultural Technology—media enterprise project; ACME—Arts, Culture, Media Enterprises—investment; and the Centre for Arts Development Training.

The trail-blazing Merseyside special investment fund has invested more than £65 million of European and private funding in 4,000 Merseyside jobs. It is hailed as a national and European example of good practice.

Liverpool's expanding universities provide educational opportunities, together with an economic spin-off, for example, through technology transfer. The CIMS—Centre of Intelligence Monitoring Systems—project at the university of Liverpool is spinning out technology into new and exciting projects. For example, new means of monitoring premature babies are being used at Liverpool Women's hospital.

Major waterfront development in Liverpool is bringing hotels, housing and tourism and the growing trade in the port of Liverpool brings jobs. The north-west and Irish trade group is identifying investment opportunities for business with Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The Government's new deal for communities has started its work in Kensington and Smithdown.

All those initiatives rest on the imaginative use of funding attracted from a wide variety of sources, but the focus needed to effect major and visible change in Liverpool city centre is absent. That is why I welcome Liverpool Vision, which is the first urban regeneration company in the country to be set up following Lord Rogers' report, "Towards an Urban Renaissance". It brings together the North-West development agency, Liverpool city council, English Partnerships and the private sector to produce strategy and design for the city centre. International competition has produced a shortlist to conduct the design. Public consultation will follow.

I call on Liverpool Vision, its partners and the local community to show that they can act decisively and collectively. The Government must consider whether additional powers are necessary to bring about the swift action that is needed. I urge Liverpool Vision to use imagination and determination to secure a prosperous city centre, which, with its internationally renowned waterfront and fine architecture, will be the pride of country and continent.

Liverpool's economy is improving. Unemployment in my constituency has reduced by more than 26 per cent. in two years, but there are still more than 5,000 people out of work. Liverpool still ranks number one in the national index of local deprivation. The recent CACI report found that nine of the 20 poorest postcodes in the country were to be found in Liverpool.

What is the way forward? It is for local knowledge, commitment and determination to ensure that European, national, regional and local initiatives support all people in Liverpool, including all its ethnic and racial groups, and that those initiatives attract private investment. Examples of good practice, such as the community-led Eldonian co-operative housing, leisure, employment and environmental regeneration in Vauxhall, should be replicated. The North-West development agency must keep Liverpool as its priority, backing local partners. The local authority must show initiative and leadership. Strategies must be turned into action.

I should like an assurance that the Government will co-operate in identifying matching funding to enable the £840 million second phase of European objective 1 funding for Merseyside to be fully utilised as additional spending. I call on the Government to review regulations that impede the most effective co-ordinated use of funds from the diverse sources available.

There is much more to achieve. Major companies must remain in the city centre and others should be encouraged to join them. Small and medium-sized enterprises and microbusinesses must be backed. I welcome the proposed new regional and local enterprise funds. The new deal must be used imaginatively. It has already brought great

benefit to Liverpool and it should be used together with funds for small businesses, training, retraining and skilling to bring new opportunities to all the people of Liverpool. Intermediate labour market schemes must be supported. Education, training and retraining must be accessible. Local people must have the opportunity to take jobs in Liverpool. Universities, which are already making a great contribution to the city, must promote the information society and back the local economy, spinning out more of their knowledge and expertise for the people of Liverpool.

All housing tenures should be encouraged, particularly as part of regeneration schemes looking at environment and employment at the same time as housing provision. The proposed cuts by the Housing Corporation because of the new formula being applied must be reconsidered. Cuts in Housing Corporation funding of around 13 per cent. for Merseyside are simply unacceptable at a time when we are trying to support and encourage the regeneration of the inner city.

The Daresbury laboratory must continue to benefit Liverpool and the north-west with its fine research capacity. Integrated infrastructure investment in air, rail, sea and road must be increased. Regeneration cannot take place simply in the place where it is being experienced. Wider investment is necessary, too. Urban spaces and parks must be valued, and investors in Liverpool must continue to be welcomed.

I call on Liverpool Vision to take up the challenge of restoring Chavasse park as a flagship project and to address the blight left elsewhere in Liverpool by the Walton group's dereliction of duty. It is not good enough for Liverpool city council simply to wring its hands because of problems that may well have been created by others.

As things stand, Liverpool will be one of perhaps only two cities in the country not to have a flagship millennium project within its precincts. That is simply not acceptable. If the millennium project has collapsed mainly because of the Walton group, and because of the bizarre circumstances surrounding it—and possibly also because of inaction by Liverpool city council—it must be up to Liverpool city council, together with Liverpool Vision, to restore what has been lost and to find new ways forward.

Lord Rogers, in his urban task force report, concludes:

"If we are to succeed in creating an urban renaissance we have to change the image of urban areas to one of attractiveness, opportunity and growth".

Liverpool is already changing both image and reality. We must all rise to the challenge of making Liverpool the prime city of the future.

10.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) on securing this debate about the regeneration of a very important city in the UK. I recognise also her long experience in working to secure regeneration through local government, and her hard work since becoming a Member of Parliament to help Liverpool get back to where it ought to be—one of our foremost cities.

My hon. Friend has outlined some of the ways in which we can begin to see the seeds of change. There has been much progress in Liverpool city centre recently. Liverpool Vision—to which my hon. Friend referred—is the first urban regeneration company, and is building on that progress. The city centre is the prime location of high-quality jobs, business and tourism.

My hon. Friend is right to say that Liverpool Vision must ensure that the wonderful potential of the sites and historic buildings of Liverpool can make the city a place for the new millennium—more jobs, more homes and more places to visit. That means improving accessibility, and the public realm, and adding value to what is already there.

If we are to achieve sustainable growth in those areas, we must involve people and communities, and build real partnerships that draw on the strength and experience of everybody. It will be important for Liverpool Vision to produce a top-quality bid in single regeneration budget round 6, which embodies the principles of sustainability and social inclusion.

We have noted that the North-West development agency has produced its strategy for the region, and that strategy recognises the regeneration of Liverpool city centre as an early priority. The agency is a founding member of Liverpool Vision and is working closely with all the partners to bring forward a strategy to help Liverpool become a world-class city. The agency believes that concentrating on the city centre is crucial to changing the economic prospects for the city as a whole. Many of the proposals likely to emerge from Liverpool Vision will require resources from the agency over the next 10 or even 15 years.

There has been much movement in the city council, with a new chief executive with an excellent track record of achieving change. Sweeping changes are taking place in the council's management, with clear portfolios of responsibility, a new Cabinet-style structure and a smaller management team. I wish David Henshaw well in his new role and assure him of our continued support.

The Liverpool democracy commission has tapped into, and revealed, tremendous popular concern about the kind of local government that the city needs for its future and has made some radical and exciting proposals, including a directly elected mayor. Many winds of change are blowing and things are beginning to happen that bode well.

My hon. Friend rightly raised the issue of the Walton group and the Exchange Flags project. The Walton Commercial Group Ltd. was awarded a grant of £4.5 million in July 1992 towards the refurbishment of the Exchange Flags building in the city centre. It was to provide 400,000 sq ft of refurbished office space and a museum. Total grant payments of nearly £4.5 million were made between November 1992 and May 1994, against claimed qualifying expenditure of more than £27 million. The situation regarding the project's realisation is much as she described.

The Government are taking the issues extremely seriously. English Partnerships, acting as agents for the Secretary of State, is reviewing the project and the use to which the grant has been put. English Partnerships has given notice of its intention to exercise its right under the terms of the agreement to enter the premises and carry out an inspection of the works and of the relevant books and records of the Walton group. I assure my hon. Friend that the Government will ensure that a thorough and determined approach is taken to investigating all those matters involving the Walton group.

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

I stress that the Government are trying to help regeneration in Liverpool across the board, through a variety of mainstream programmes as well as specific regeneration initiatives. That includes health, education and housing.

Liverpool has been chosen to have two new education action zones, in Dingle, in Granby and Toxteth and in Speke-Garston. Both will begin work next spring. That is an important success for Liverpool. More than 120 applications to run zones were received in round 2 and only 48 were shortlisted for further development.

As part of "Excellence in Cities", two new beacon schools for Liverpool were announced by my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on 23 November: the King David high school and St. Malachy's primary school. They are among the best-performing schools in the country and are examples of successful practice that are being brought to the attention of others with a view to sharing that practice. City learning centres will provide state-of-the-art information and communication technology-based learning opportunities for pupils, teachers and the wider community and will be based in the inner city.

Merseyside has a strong health action zone comprising the local and health authorities across Merseyside. It is the largest HAZ in England and has been allocated £13.7 million over the next three years. It has been operational only since May but several projects are already under way. It is concentrating on developing the strongest possible partnerships with delivery agencies in a well-focused attack on health inequalities. The first mid-year review, conducted in October, was well received and the mood was upbeat.

The work to find housing solutions for the inner core of Liverpool is crucial but we must have a strategy linking into Liverpool Vision's across-the-board work. Liverpool has already done excellent work on homelessness, refugees and asylum seekers, anti-social behaviour and supported housing. I am aware of the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Riverside about an 11 per cent. reduction in housing provision for Merseyside from the Housing Corporation as a result of changes in the way the figures are calculated. However, that figure needs to be read alongside the housing investment programme for Merseyside. We will make some important announcements on the housing investment programme shortly, and I ask that my hon. Friend waits for those announcements before making her judgments on the matter.

We need to know much more about demand for housing in Liverpool, because otherwise we are fighting in the dark. I am glad to say that Liverpool has engaged the university of Birmingham to undertake a full assessment of the housing demand picture. It has also commissioned land surveys by Grimleys. It is too early to judge the outcome of the surveys but, so far, the city council has stuck to the task and put resources behind it.

In addition to those mainstream initiatives that have benefited Liverpool, there has also been the single regeneration budget. Round 5 is the latest, and Liverpool city centre secured £475,000 in total. Liverpool Vision has been asked to submit a comprehensive bid for round 6 of the SRB in the context of a strategic regeneration plan for the city. The round 5 proposal, which was supported, is a preparatory move for the round 6 bid. The round 5 proposals can shape the round 6 bid, especially in terms of developing genuine community capacity building and testing innovative approaches to regeneration. The bidding guidance for round 6 will be published next month. We are looking for Liverpool Vision to put in a really good proposal for Liverpool in that round.

In addition, the round 5 scheme for Speke-Garston—a total of £10 million, with an SRB contribution of more than £4 million—will build on the jobs and other benefits of the round 1 schemes in Speke-Garston. The development company there has been a major player in attracting investment, such as the Jaguar X400 investment in Halewood, which has also attracted other companies to the area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Riverside raised the issue of European objective 1 funding for Merseyside for 2000-06, and we are pleased that Merseyside achieved objective 1 status. However, it has never been the case that the Government have had to make matched funding available for objective 1 European funds. It is not correct to state that the Government have to match objective 1 EU funding for £844 million for Merseyside on a pound-for-pound basis in order receive that funding. My hon. Friend will know from her previous experience that objective 1 funds from the EU can be used to fund up to 75 per cent. of regeneration schemes, with applicants having to find the rest from UK sources, either public or private.

For the previous Merseyside programme, the regeneration partners thought that they could find pound-for-pound matched funds for European objective 1 funds. However, some regeneration scheme applications found it difficult to locate the funding on that basis. The Government are trying to maximise the grant rate from European funding to reduce the matching funding that needs to be found here and also to ensure that the maximum amount of European funding is drawn down, so that the maximum number of projects can be funded. That approach will also free up Government funding for other regeneration schemes in the area. We are not at odds with the spirit of what my hon. Friend the Member for Riverside is trying to achieve, but the position is not as simple as she seemed to suggest when one tries to ensure the maximum resources from all possible sources end up in Liverpool supporting regeneration projects.

The economic revival of Liverpool is there for us to begin to see. The transformation of Merseyside includes the complete refurbishment of the Albert dock area, where a media cluster has begun to develop. Planet Wild is an independent television production company that has received three Royal Television Society awards since it was established 18 months ago. A company called Amaze, situated in the Port of Liverpool building, is a world-class designer of software, websites and expandable movies—I am not sure what they are, but they sound interesting—and is a leader in computer-mediated communication.

The transformation of a 64-acre former railway marshalling yard into the Wavertree technology park is further clear evidence of Merseyside's determination to play a major part in the new, technology driven economy. Equally, several automotive companies are locating,

or will be doing so, in the Speke-Garston-Halewood area, and the Speke-Garston development company has been a major player in attracting that investment.

I mentioned the Jaguar initiative earlier, and other companies—including Lear, Conix and Johnson Controls—have also brought investment to the Halewood area. That has linked parts of Liverpool such as the Speke-Garston area to areas of need, and thus represents a real opportunity for the city.

We have heard tonight about the progress already being made in Liverpool. The process of regeneration has already begun. Partnerships between local communities and the business and voluntary sectors are building a foundation for change and growth, along with local and regional government, and central Government. Government initiatives such as the single regeneration budget demonstrate what can be achieved through working together. We recognise the importance of involving local people in finding solutions to Liverpool's problems, and of giving the people of the city a greater stake in the success of its development and its future.

I hope that we have learned a critical lesson from Liverpool's long history. The change being brought about cannot be sustained unless people are properly involved and have ownership of it. We must build people into the programme of change, from the outset and from the bottom up.

The Government, and other bodies, are trying to take a holistic approach to Liverpool's regeneration, by combining health, economic and environmental initiatives with lasting benefits for the community. I have great hopes for Liverpool Vision, our first urban regeneration company. I am sure that it will benefit the city and demonstrate the value of such companies, of which I believe that there will be more. I am also sure that the North-West regional development agency will be important in implementing economic and social change in the area.

A great deal of work remains to be done, as my hon. Friend the Member for Riverside will know. However, we are putting in place a framework that I hope will provide opportunities to raise the quality of life in Liverpool for all those who work there.

My hon. Friend knows Liverpool very well. I hope that she will agree that Liverpool now has something that it has needed for perhaps 25 years—a constellation of people, business, local governance and local organisations working together and pulling in the same direction.

In the past, Liverpool has been dogged by the lack of a consensus about what needs to be done and how to go about doing it, and its people have suffered as a result. Matters are different now, and people are willing to pull in the same direction. The work done by my hon. Friend and her colleagues in that regard has been very important. I wish Liverpool well, and assure her that the Government want the city to succeed as it ought to.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at sixteen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 30 November 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(By Order)*

Order for consideration read.

To be considered on Tuesday 7 December.

CITY OF STOKE-ON-TRENT TUNSTALL NORTHERN BY-PASS LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT COMPULSORY PURCHASE ORDER 1997

Ordered,

That the Committee appointed to join with the Lords as the Joint Committee to consider the Petitions of General Objection against the City of Stoke-on-Trent Tunstall Northern By-Pass Local Government Act Compulsory Purchase Order 1997 have leave to visit and inspect the site of the proposed by-pass, and other sites named in the order, provided that no evidence shall be taken in the course of such visit and that any party who has made an Appearance before the Committee be permitted to attend by their Counsel or Agent or other representative.—[*The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.*]

Message to the Lords to acquaint them therewith.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Local Authorities (SSA)

1. **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): If he will make a statement on the Government's proposals for determining the standard spending assessment settlement for local authorities for 2000–01. [99006]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I was pleased to announce to the House last week that we have again provided a generous increase in grant for local authorities, which will enable them to continue to pursue with vigour their policies and the Government's priorities for action.

Mr. Healey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Is she aware that in authorities such as mine in Rotherham there is strong support for the principle of the three-year freeze in SSA changes and for the longer-term finance review? Will she give particular consideration in that review to the treatment of capital financing? Will she condemn last week's comments by councillor Peter Chalke, leader of the Tory county councils network? He said that the

"settlement demonstrates that the Labour Government is the enemy of the countryside."

The average increase for all authorities in the settlement is more than 5 per cent. and the increase for Councillor Chalke's authority in Wiltshire is 5.6 per cent.

Ms Armstrong: I think that Councillor Chalke, along with some Conservative Members, made his remarks before he had studied the settlement. There were no changes in methodology. The settlement showed, as Conservative Members ultimately had to agree, that shire counties got an above average rise. We have to work hard to move forward and ensure that local people understand the settlement, which should reflect the additional money that the Government are putting in so that local people know the priority that is given to public services at local level.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Does the Minister accept that authorities that find that the SSA formula does not reflect fairly on them have been disadvantaged in year one, disadvantaged this year and further disadvantaged next year? Surely that is unfair. They are having to put up their council tax above the Government's targets and cut services. Surely they deserve a better deal than being told that there can be no changes to the unfair formula for three years.

Ms Armstrong: As I announced to the House last week, we have continued damping arrangements that mean that no education authority receives less than a 1.5 per cent. increase. All authorities knew what they were to get over the three years. It is easier for any organisation to have a three-year plan rather than a single-year plan to decide how money is to be used and how to get the best from that spending.

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke–on–Trent, Central): On the long-term future of the SSA, does my right hon. Friend accept that the effect of the current formula is so bizarre and awry that a city such as Stoke-on-Trent receives hundreds of pounds per child less each year than areas of acute deprivation such as Surrey and Hertfordshire? Will she urge her working party to act as quickly as possible and will she undertake to be bold and radical in tackling a problem that has defeated government for the last 10 years?

Ms Armstrong: My hon. Friend is right to point out that some of the effects of the current formula are difficult to justify locally. That is why we are having a root and branch review. We are working with authorities throughout the country in an attempt to find an alternative to the current SSA methodology. The overwhelming view that was expressed in the survey of authorities that we conducted was that SSAs are not working effectively. It is not just me but the authorities that have to be radical in

how they look at future funding. We need a system that is as fair as possible, but they must recognise that it is inevitable that not everyone will be fully satisfied.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): Will the Minister confirm that support for shire districts has plummeted under this Government? They have had a cut of £220 million, or 28 per cent., on what they received in 1997-98. Kent is facing an £8 million cut in total grant next year. Does she accept that it is no consolation to such councils, mainly in country areas, as they face great unfairness, higher council tax and cuts in services, that they have what she calls stability for three years? They would far rather have had the chance to come to see her last year or this year to persuade her to change the methodology. Does she accept that in talking about generosity and stability, she is merely disguising the true position, which is that many of the councils are being treated unfairly by the Government not only in year one, but in years two and three, so that it truly is a case of this Government being the enemy of the countryside?

Ms Armstrong: That is arrant nonsense. As the hon. Gentleman knows, shire counties have done better than average this year. No shire county—not a single one—is having its grant cut. Every county and every metropolitan authority is receiving a minimum 1.5 per cent. increase, which does not equate to a cut of £8 million. The hon. Gentleman can project what he would like to spend next year, and then say that a salary has been cut because it is not meeting his budget. That is what he is talking about, but that is not proper budgeting. Kent, along with other areas, is receiving the minimum protection, but Kent is doing better than that. If one adds up the amounts going to shire counties and shire districts, the amount going to the countryside is, to put it mildly, generous.

New Deal for Communities

2. **Ms Margaret Moran** (Luton, South): If he will make a statement on the progress of the new deal for communities in Luton. [99007]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I was delighted to announce that Luton is one of the 22 areas eligible to put forward proposals for the transformation of a deprived neighbourhood under the second round of the new deal for communities. I will ensure that local people, businesses and organisations get the support that they need to deliver real equality of opportunity and choice in that neighbourhood.

Ms Moran: I thank my right hon. Friend for her wisdom in selecting Luton as one of the pilot areas for the new deal for communities. Is she aware that, in the centre of my constituency, young people from Bangladeshi and Pakistani households are four times more likely to be unemployed than the national average, despite educational attainments that are similar to the national average? How does my right hon. Friend see the new deal for communities working in conjunction with other Government initiatives which Luton is pleased to receive to tackle that severe problem, so that all the youngsters in my constituency have an equal opportunity to find jobs?

Ms Armstrong: The report that led to the launch of the new deal for communities pointed out that, in our most deprived neighbourhoods, it is much more difficult for people to find work, and that is particularly true for those from ethnic minorities. We should not tolerate that in our society, and we are determined to give local communities the tools to turn that around. One of the policy action teams has been looking at access to jobs, and another has been looking at skills. We are confident that we will be able to work with local communities to make sure that they are able to turn their areas around and to bring jobs, decent health standards, decent education and hope to those areas.

Green Belt

3. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement on protection of the green belt in Mill Hill and Totteridge valley. [99008]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): In most cases, this is a matter for the London borough of Barnet, though my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister expects the borough to have firm greenbelt protection policies in its development plan. My right hon. Friend will consider calling in planning applications that appear to conflict with greenbelt policies and deal with appeals in greenbelt cases in line with his commitment to green belts.

Mr. Dismore: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's decisions on recent planning applications for an enormous riding centre at Belmont stables and a plan by Barnet football club for a 10,000-seater stadium on greenbelt land were very much welcomed by my constituents. However, is my hon. Friend aware that Barnet FC has come forward with a plan to put a 9,999-seater stadium at exactly the same location with virtually identical plans? Will the Secretary of State take a robust line, as he has in the past, to defend the green belt against such depredations?

Mr. Raynsford: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments on decisions taken by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. My hon. Friend has indicated that a further application is apparently in the pipeline, so it would not be appropriate for me to make any comments about it, other than to reiterate that the application will be considered closely in line with the Government's stated policy on the green belt, as set out in planning policy guidance 2, and where there is a presumption against inappropriate development within the green belt.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): The statement today will be welcomed by Londoners, not only in the northern part of London to which the Minister referred, but more extensively, because the Government's record in preserving metropolitan green belt has been abysmal, especially at Stevenage and in Sussex. Can the Minister assure us that from now on, especially as aide-de-camp to the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), he will be vigilant in ensuring

that the metropolitan green belt is preserved, because it is the heritage of Londoners as well as inhabitants of the communities in which it is located?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman is not correct in his views about the green belt. As he knows, my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) has just complimented the Government on their decisions in protection of the green belt in London. The hon. Gentleman will also be aware that in the two and a half years since the Government came to power the amount of green belt has been extended by some 30,000 hectares, and we are clear about our commitment to the preservation of the green belt.

Parks

4. **Mr. Andrew F. Bennett** (Denton and Reddish): If he will make a statement about parks. [99009]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): The House is well aware of my hon. Friend's commitment to improving access to areas of countryside and the parks. We welcome the recent report from his Environment Sub-Committee on town and country parks and we share its concern about the quality and future of our parks. We will publish our full response early in the new year.

Mr. Bennett: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does he accept that parks give many people much pleasure, but that the past 30 years have seen a tremendous decline in municipal parks? We must reverse that decline. If we want to stop the drift from the north and from the cities to the countryside, it is important to regenerate our cities. Parks could be one of the key elements in that regeneration and should be a key part of the Government's forthcoming urban White Paper.

Mr. Prescott: The Government share the Committee's concern about the decline of our parks. Since we came to power we have done several things about the green belt and parks. For example, by tightening the controls, we have halted the sale of playing fields, which the previous Administration encouraged. We have also recently announced a new opportunities fund for green spaces, which contains £125 million for developing green spaces, funded by the national lottery. We are currently preparing our urban White Paper and my hon. Friend's report will be considered in that process.

The report contains a powerful quotation from John Ruskin, which should be the guiding principle for the House:

> "The measure of any great civilisation is its cities, and the measure of any city's greatness is to be found in the quality of its public spaces, its parks and its squares."

That is the principle that has governed the actions of Labour Governments and councils for many years.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): If the Government feel that the New forest deserves more protection than it has already, why are they insisting on imposing the straitjacket of a national park on it? For many years the New forest has been protected by special legislation. If the Government have no parliamentary time for special legislation now, why do they not wait until they can do the job properly?

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman properly represents the interests of his constituency—I understand that—but the country generally welcomed the announcement that we made about the two national parks, which followed what a Labour Government had done many years before. The parks policy is important and popular, and we are proud that we have implemented it 50 years after the first legislation to introduce national parks.

Housing

5. **Mr. Tom Levitt** (High Peak): What measures the Government are taking to promote increased accessibility of housing for the elderly and disabled. [99010]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): My Department is taking a number of steps to promote better access to housing for elderly and disabled people. We have extended part M of the building regulations to improve accessibility of new housing to disabled people, we have highlighted the needs of disabled people in guidance this year on local authority housing investment programmes, we are increasing the resources available for disabled facilities grants by a quarter over three years, and we will shortly be issuing new guidance to local authorities on registers of accessible housing.

Mr. Levitt: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I am sure that he will wish to pay tribute to organisations such as Scope, which has campaigned for so long for accessible housing, and to local authorities which promote the concept of the lifetime home, something that I hope he will encourage. Can my hon. Friend also tell me how the very welcome initiative of extending part M to domestic properties will be monitored and enforced?

Mr. Raynsford: We certainly pay tribute to the work of the many voluntary organisations, including Scope and the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation, which advised us thoroughly and well on the procedures leading up to the extension of part M of the building regulations. We are delighted to have their support.

I assure my hon. Friend that we will be reviewing the effectiveness of part M 12 months after the changes were introduced in October this year. In preparation, we have alerted local authorities and house builders so that they can keep appropriate records to enable us to carry out a thorough review.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): How does the Minister reconcile the answers that he has given so far with his party's abolition of the advance corporation tax dividend tax credit, which has had a serious effect on charities' receipts? Charities such as the Royal United Kingdom Beneficent Association—RUKBA—which help elderly and disabled people to obtain quality housing and give them the support that they require say that they have

suffered a marked reduction in income. Removing the ACT dividend tax credit sits ill with the Minister's answers today.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman is trying pretty hard, and stretching logic to an extraordinary extent, to make his point. I stress that the voluntary organisations which deal with disability have warmly welcomed the Government's actions. They applauded our action in extending part M of the building regulations which the previous Government had refused to do, despite the voluntary organisations' entreaties. It is sheer hypocrisy for the Conservative party to pretend that it is the friend of the voluntary sector.

Bus Services

6. **Mr. Harry Barnes** (North–East Derbyshire): What representations he has received concerning the operation of bus services in north-east Derbyshire; and if he will make a statement. [99012]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): Three representations have been received regarding bus services in north-east Derbyshire since July 1999, two from my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) and one from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner).

It was clear from the bus summit earlier this month that the industry has begun to rise to the challenge of improving bus travel. We are determined to make further progress in ensuring that good-quality, reliable services are available across the country. The forthcoming transport Bill will help deliver this objective.

Mr. Barnes: I could send my hon. Friend another 100 letters and two petitions about Stagecoach problems in north-east Derbyshire, but those have gone to the traffic commissioner. Will my hon. Friend agree that it pays to mobilise and organise where bus services are inadequate? Following his response to Thursday's Adjournment debate, there are signs that things are already improving for Stagecoach. The bus that I caught at a busy period on Monday morning was on time. Buses are being drafted in from Grimsby and London to tackle the problem. Is it my hon. Friend's view that as long an eye is kept on what takes place, matters will work out in the long run?

Mr. Hill: I am delighted to hear from my hon. Friend that things are already looking up. I entirely agree with him that campaigning can lead to improved services. If I may say so, my hon. Friend has proved himself a doughty campaigner on behalf of his constituents and of bus users in the wider Derbyshire area. As a result of his efforts, the bus operator and Derbyshire county council are working together to secure what I am sure will be significant improvements in local bus services.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Is the Minister aware that pensioners in north-east Derbyshire using the bus services benefit from a concessionary fare scheme, and that that scheme is funded by the local council? Is he further aware that since July 1998 the Government have tried to claim credit for the introduction of a Government-funded concessionary fare scheme for pensioners? Will he acknowledge that there is no money in the Government's budget for the next two years to fund a pensioner concessionary fare scheme, and will he therefore stop trying to take credit for that initiative? It is one thing to wait hours for a bus but quite a different matter to wait years for a Government-funded concessionary fare scheme.

Mr. Hill: I am fully aware that many Labour authorities provide concessionary bus fares, for which they deserve much credit. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government intend to introduce a national concessionary fare scheme as part of our transport Bill.

Business Rates

7. **Mr. David Ruffley** (Bury St. Edmunds): What representations he has received regarding the level of business rates. [99013]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): We have received over 270 responses to our consultation paper on a transition scheme to phase in large changes in rate bills, resulting from the revaluation due on 1 April 2000. The details of this scheme were announced on 25 November.

We have also received representations from various businesses and special interest groups about the level of business rates.

Mr. Ruffley: Is the Minister aware that some large out-of-town superstores in my constituency pay business rates equivalent to less than 10 per cent. of their profits, while some small retailers in the centres of Stowmarket and Bury St. Edmunds pay business rates equivalent to about 35 per cent. of profits? That is a huge burden on small business. Will the Minister explain exactly what she will do to reform the business rate regime to help small businesses in my constituency?

Ms Armstrong: The hon. Gentleman is a relatively new Member of Parliament, and so perhaps does not realise that the uniform business rate was introduced by the previous Conservative Administration, which he supported. The hon. Gentleman will also know from what I said on Thursday that the Government are to review how the valuation is conducted and how it kicks in. I look forward to his comments then. However, I remind him that, because of the impact on small businesses and to take account of the points that he has raised, we have introduced a transitional scheme that benefits small businesses more than large ones.

Parish Councils

8. **Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry): What steps he is taking to cut the costs of auditing the accounts of parish councils. [99014]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): Although audit fees are a matter for the independent Audit Commission, the Government are aware of the impact that they can have on small parish councils. The commission is currently

piloting two exercises to see whether the cost of audits of parish councils can be reduced while the necessary level of assurance is maintained.

Mr. Boswell: Does the Minister feel any sympathy for the parish clerk of Aston le Walls who has written to me to state that the parish council's audit fee for 1998 was only just under £500, plus value added tax? She is not the only one of my constituents in that position. The parish has a population of 350 persons, and a total precept of only about £3,500, so is not the audit cost totally out of line? Revenue must be safeguarded, but will the Minister urgently examine ways to introduce the necessary flexibility and a much cheaper audit process?

Ms Hughes: The figures that the hon. Gentleman gives are completely out of line: a precept of £3,500 is below the threshold of £5,000, and the average bill last year for a parish council of that size was £160. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will write to me to confirm the figures that he gave, and I shall certainly look into the matter, as the cost that he quoted bears no resemblance to last year's average. However, I remind him that the regulations establishing the current fee structure were introduced by the previous Conservative Government. As I said, the Audit Commission is conducting studies to determine whether appointing local auditors would bring down costs even further, especially for small parish councils.

Mr. David Taylor (North–West Leicestershire): I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and am pleased to hear of the review. As a sitting parish councillor and an accountant, I have visited nearly all 25 parish councils in North-West Leicestershire. The impact of the audit fee is a common issue to be raised. Will she urge the Audit commission to look even more closely at the effect on the smaller community—typically with a population of fewer than 1,000—to find out whether there are ways in which the audit fee can be capped relative to precept as a proportion, or in relation to the volume of transactions? The commission is grappling with an important and difficult problem.

Ms Hughes: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I know of his work on parish councils and his commitment. A scheme exists already under which small parish councils can effectively roll three annual reviews into an audit. It is a triennial scheme and the councils can have an audit once every three years, thereby cutting their overheads substantially. I hear what my hon. Friend says. The Audit Commission is considering ways in which it can bring costs down, possibly by appointing local auditors and provided that the necessary levels of assurance can be guaranteed. I know that my hon. Friend will agree, however, that although we want to reduce the costs and burdens on parish councils, it is nevertheless important that they are subject to an independent audit, which is important for the protection of public money and for the protection of councillors, so that they are seen to be accounting properly for that money.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): The Minister seeks to reassure parish councils. Will she acknowledge that her right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, who is regrettably missing his second out of three departmental Question Times, although for reasons that I understand today, originally put much fear into the parish council movement by saying that the Government were thinking of abolishing such councils? Will the hon. Lady confirm that that idea was just an embarrassing mistake? Furthermore, can she tell us when we will see the rural White Paper, so that we can see in black and white what further attacks the Government are planning on hard-working parish councils?

Ms Hughes: We have no plans to abolish parish councils. The rural White Paper will be produced next summer.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I thank my hon. Friend for her answer and register an interest. Like my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) I am a member of a town council and I spend many hours toiling over its problems. As the Vice-President of the National Association of Local Councils, can I ask my hon. Friend whether she will continue to discuss with the association this very issue? As my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire said, it is by far the most important issue that small parish councils raise. I am sure that if we can find a solution to the problem, we will continue to have healthy local councils in many areas.

Ms Hughes: Yes, I do hear what my hon. Friend has said. To put the matter in context, given the large number of parish councils in the country, the Audit Commission has received 75 complaints this year about the level of fees, in particular from small councils. It is not a problem of enormous significance, but I accept that it affects small councils disproportionately. We await with interest the results of the Audit Commission's exercise and will talk to it about how it can implement its findings to the best possible effect for small parish councils.

Rural Rail Services

9. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What his policy is on supporting rural rail services. [99015]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): We are determined to improve the railways so that they can offer an alternative to the car, not least in rural areas. The new rail passenger partnership scheme will provide additional funding for new or enhanced local and regional rail services that cannot be justified on financial grounds alone.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but is he aware that the often inadequate service in the west country misses out enormous parts of the rural areas of Somerset, Devon and Cornwall? Is he also aware that the rail service could provide a much fuller contribution to rural public transport? That would require stations to be opened, reopened and refurbished. Who is to pay for that—Railtrack, the rail companies, the local authorities or central Government?

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman will recall that it will be a duty of the new Strategic Rail Authority to promote and develop the rail system. We certainly expect it to pursue that task where rural rail services are concerned.

Meanwhile, I am pleased to report that the shadow strategic rail authority has to date received 31 bids for funding under the rail passenger partnership scheme, which should follow through into further improvements in rural rail services.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Is my hon. Friend aware that, as a direct result of the Government's policies, the reopening of rural rail links for passengers is being considered for the first time since 1964? In my constituency, there is a good chance that the Vale of Glamorgan railway line will be just such a service. That will not only provide transport for our commuters and relieve congestion on our roads, but provide direct access to Cardiff international airport and remove pressure from the InterCity line. When my hon. Friend next speaks to the Transport Secretary of the Welsh Assembly, will he tell him that the Assembly will have the full support of this House if it awards a passenger transport grant for that line?

Mr. Hill: Yes, we certainly will.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Does the Minister agree that the opportunities afforded to him by privatisation of the railways open up the possibility of developing the rural rail network? Will he correct the possible misinterpretation of remarks made by his predecessor in office, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson)? She seemed to suggest that, in certain circumstances, rural railway lines could be replaced by buses. Will the Minister give the same commitment that we made, when the railways were privatised, that there will be no branch line closures?

Mr. Hill: Let me make it entirely clear that the remarks of my honourable and beloved predecessor on that matter were subject to gross misinterpretation. I emphasise that we have absolutely no plans to replace loss-making rural services with buses. I remind the hon. Gentleman that key services are contractually safeguarded through the passenger service requirements. In rural areas, where services are heavily dependent on subsidy, PSRs are closely based on the timetable that operated prior to privatisation. Discontinuation of services on branch lines can occur only after comprehensive closure procedures have been exhausted. Those powers have been used only rarely; I do not expect that to change.

Eurostar

10. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What progress he has made in establishing regional Eurostar services north of London. [99016]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The provision of Eurostar services north of London is currently the subject of an extensive review, the results of which we expect to receive shortly.

Mr. Kidney: When the decision whether to proceed is finally taken, will that decision be fully informed not only by the Government's excellent transport policies but by their equally excellent policies for regional economic development and social inclusion?

Mr. Mullin: The review has to take into account a wide range of factors, not least of which are the viability of the service and environmental, social and economic considerations. We expect to receive its report shortly.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What assessment has the hon. Gentleman made of the technological impediments to the operation of regional Eurostar services? Will he favour us by providing a copy of that assessment in the Library?

Mr. Mullin: When the report is available, all the technological aspects will also be dealt with, and the hon. Gentleman will be rewarded—he can spend many hours studying them.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Does the Minister agree that there is no finer example of what the previous Government left us than the north-south divide, and the fact that the Eurostar service does not run north of London? That is despite the promises made in the Channel Tunnel Act 1987 and despite the fact that millions of pounds of public money were put into the project. Does he also agree that if Eurostar is to run a service on the west coast main line, that line must be upgraded? Is he satisfied with the work that Railtrack is putting in? Does he agree that if it is to cost £4 billion to upgrade the west coast main line, that would be money well spent.

Mr. Mullin: I understand that agreement has been reached on upgrading the west coast main line; I am sure that that will happen in the near future. As a Member who represents a constituency that is almost as far north as that of my hon. Friend, I share his desire to see Eurostar running services to the north. However, that will depend on what the review determines; the service must be viable.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Does the Minister understand that we are chronically short of railway capacity in this country, thanks to the Labour Government's policies? Was it not a great Labour lie to say that public transport would get better under this Government, when we all know that it is getting worse and is not providing the alternative that many want?

When, therefore, will the Minister and the Secretary of State take decisions on Railtrack's ways of obtaining revenue? Why will they not allow more revenue to be given to Railtrack when they expand the network, and less for providing what is already being supplied? We have been waiting for a decision on that for months, but the Secretary of State will say absolutely nothing about it.

Would it not be common sense to spend the money that Railtrack does have on improvements to expand the capacity of the railway network instead of on taking over the Circle and District lines? We want new tracks; we do not want Railtrack to take on things that could be organised better with private money coming from different sources. The Government are short-changing the

public; they are providing a bad service. It is high time that they woke up and brought in the money that is needed to do the job.

Mr. Mullin: I have to say that, even by the right hon. Gentleman's normal standards, that was an exceptionally cynical performance. Under the present Government, the number of trains is up by 1,000 a day. [HON. MEMBERS: "Passengers?"] The number of passengers is up by about 14 per cent.

Parish Councils

11. **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): If he will make a statement on the future of parish councils. [99017]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I repeat that we have no plans to abolish parish councils. Our clear and consistent policy is that parish councils will continue to play a key role in many of our towns and villages.

In our forthcoming rural White Paper, we intend to address further how we see parish councils playing their part in rural local governance.

Mr. Blizzard: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and agree with her that parish councils play a vital and valuable role in our towns and villages. Can she confirm that the Government have created 33 new parish councils since they came to power, and will she join me in condemning the irresponsible scaremongering contained in a letter that was sent to all parish councils in Suffolk by the leader and deputy leader of the Conservative group, saying that parish councils might be abolished? Is not that a waste of the money of council tax payers, who had to pay for the paper on which it was written?

Ms Hughes: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is a waste of taxpayers' money, and that scaremongering is being supported by Conservative Front-Bench Members for their own political ends. Yes, the Government have created another 33 parish councils since May 1997, and we intend to create another 25 before elections in May 2000. That is our commitment to parish councils. We want them to play an enhanced role in rural communities and in local governance at all levels. Therefore, we intend to strengthen and support parish councils.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): At the Labour party conference, the Minister for the Environment said that parish councils should be replaced by something revolting called neighbourhood forums. Can the hon. Lady confirm that that is wrong, and that the proportion of elected members on parish councils will not be reduced?

Ms Hughes: My right hon. Friend did not make those remarks. That is not our policy, and I am very surprised that the hon. Gentleman, as a member of the Conservative party, purports to believe everything that he reads in the newspapers. I have made our policy clear—we support parish councils.

Regional Development

12. **Mr. Ernie Ross** (Dundee, West): What assessment he has made of local strategies for regional development. [99019]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): I received regional strategies from the chairmen of the eight English regional development agencies on 26 October. We aim to respond to them by the end of the year.

Mr. Ross: Does the Secretary of State agree that the regional development agencies in England, together with Scottish Enterprise, the Welsh Development Agency and the Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland, have at last put coherence into the economic development policy in the whole of the United Kingdom? What does my right hon. Friend believe the consequences of the Tory party's policy to abolish them would be?

Mr. Prescott: I agree with my hon. Friend that the regional development agencies in the English regions have got off to a flying start. In their first six months of operation, hundreds of thousands of jobs have been created and many hundreds of millions of pounds have been invested. That is a matter of public record.

As for whether the Opposition will abolish the regional development agencies, it is interesting to note that, although the Scottish Development Agency and Welsh Development Agency have been very successful, the Conservatives appear to want to deny such an agency for the English regions. However, it may be of comfort to my hon. Friend to learn that in 1979 the Conservatives promised to abolish the Welsh and Scotch—*[Interruption]*—the Welsh and Scottish Development Agencies. However, when they came to power, they failed to do so.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): Yesterday, in London, the Prime Minister let it be known that there was, he felt, no such thing as a north-south divide. Just three days before that, on Friday, he was in his constituency in the north and said, "We are not happy with the north-south divide." Which is right—the answer that the Prime Minister gave in the north or the one that he gave in the south?

Mr. Prescott: The right answer is the one that the Prime Minister has constantly given: he is concerned about growing disparities in the English regions. That is why the Government introduced regional development agencies to work on reducing the disparities between the English regions. After all, the Prime Minister spoke of concern for the many, and that is behind that policy.

South East of England Development Agency

13. **Dr. Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test): What impact the establishment of the South East of England Development Agency has had on the south-east region. [99020]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): The agency has successfully brought together regeneration, skills and business development programmes and staff from four separate organisations to provide an integrated approach to the promotion of sustainable economic development. The agency has also led a highly effective consultative process to develop the first regional economic strategy for that region.

Dr. Whitehead: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does she agree that, as a result of the inward investment that has already been achieved by SEEDA together with the championing of venture capital, proposals to abolish or amend the operation of SEEDA would be neither wise nor common sense?

Ms Armstrong: I agree with my hon. Friend. We inherited significant imbalances between regions. However, within regions there are also significant pockets of disadvantage that need to be tackled. If we are to have sustainable economic growth across the country, we need a much more active regional policy, with organisations such as SEEDA properly consulting and working with the public and other organisations in their regions so that they achieve sustainable development that addresses regional imbalances.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Does the Minister share my lack of surprise that the latest glossy publication to drop on my desk yesterday from SEEDA contained several pictures of its chairman meeting the great and the good? They would have done credit to the most egotistical prospective parliamentary candidate. One picture was of the chairman and the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions opening not a new business in the south-east but another set of offices for SEEDA.

Ms Armstrong: We know how low the Tory party's reputation has sunk with business. I remind the hon. Gentleman that all the development agencies are chaired by business people. They look for support from all parties and they are not party political. He may want to impugn the Conservative party's standing given how little money the party now receives from the wider business community, so it is a pity that he is prepared to attack the holders of those posts in any way.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Is my right hon. Friend aware that SEEDA's plan not only identifies a north-south divide—if there is one—but a south-south divide and identifies the under-performance of areas such as Hastings and Rye? Its plan suggests that one of the essential things that could be done is the building of the Hastings bypass. Will that suggestion be pursued?

Ms Armstrong: It is of course true, as I told my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead), that there are imbalances within regions, and the Government are determined to take a holistic view of how to tackle those imbalances. Unlike the Conservative party, we are not prepared to put up with some people being able to get jobs while others cannot.

Train Fares

14. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What steps he is taking to encourage train operating companies to reduce fare levels. [99021]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): Increases in key fares have been restricted to below inflation increases for the second year running, with tougher caps placed on London operators to reflect poor performance over the past year. We look to train operators to consider whether increasing unregulated off-peak fares is the best way to attract new rail passengers.

Mr. Baker: I welcome that answer, but does the Minister agree that one reason why people do not often travel by train is the astronomical cost of many train journeys, which is far higher than the equivalent cost of petrol mileage for the same journey? Will he help to end the mindset that money spent on roads is investment while money spent on trains is subsidy? Does he agree that it might be a sensible use of his Department's money to help to achieve a cut in train fares? Will he investigate that before his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State resurrects the environmentally damaging roads programme?

Mr. Mullin: I certainly agree that price is very important if one is hoping to attract people on to the railways. On average, regulated rail fares across the network will rise by less than inflation for the second year running, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that. The key fares are capped at 1 per cent. below the rate of inflation until 2003. Connex SouthCentral, which serves Lewes, has again had its fares capped below the rate of inflation, and I hope that he will join me in celebrating that.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): Is my hon. Friend aware that since privatisation, the cost of subsidising the rail services between Loughborough and Leicester, which are subsidised by Leicestershire county council, doubled overnight simply because of the operating costs and profits built into the privatised system? Will my hon. Friend tell me what was the outcome of the review of the rail companies' operating costs and profits, so that the subsidy can be cut and the real benefit will be felt by the passengers, not the companies?

Mr. Mullin: We shall in due course renegotiate the franchises, which will give us an opportunity to consider all the issues that my hon. Friend has raised.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Will the Minister agree to meet a delegation from my constituency who are concerned about fare levels and standards of service on the railways and the tube, which many of them use on their way to work?

Given that in his answer to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) the Minister referred to London operators, will he comment on the analysis by BBC television's "The Money Programme" of the claims made by the Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) and the hon.

Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) that it is completely impossible to fund London underground's reconstruction by a bond issue because the New York bond issue had been a disaster? "The Money Programme" showed that those claims were completely inaccurate—the bond issue in New York was a huge success—and when the private sector was fully able to operate, we had a much better London underground system.

Mr. Mullin: The hon. Gentleman should not believe everything that he sees on the television; that can be very bad for you. I did not see the programme in question so I cannot comment on it. I, or one of my colleagues, would, of course, be glad to meet a delegation from his constituency to discuss the matters that he mentioned.

M4 Bus Lane

15. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What assessment he has made of the impact of the M4 bus lane on average journey times. [99022]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): The M4 bus lane pilot scheme is being monitored by the Transport Research Laboratory. The results show that in the first three months following the opening of the bus lane, buses and taxis are saving up to nine minutes in the morning and evening peak periods, while other vehicles are saving up to six minutes in the same periods. The reduction in the speed limits which accompanied the introduction of the bus lane resulted in slightly longer journey times outside the peak periods, but the overall effect was a reduction in total travel time of 3,500 hours a week for those using the road.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I am confident that the reduction in journey times is good for business people travelling between Slough and London. However, will my hon. Friend consider taking one more step to speed up journeys even further? Many of my constituents and I travel on the motorway in the early hours of the morning and, as my constituent Angela Kirk puts it:

"It is very annoying only being able to do 50 mph at 3 am when there is virtually no other car on the road."

Will my hon. Friend consider restricting the hours during which the 50 mph limit applies?

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend is right to represent the concerns of her constituents. I assure her that the matter will be considered as part of the continuing monitoring and review of the scheme, and especially the safety implications.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Why does the Minister not ensure that his measurements start from the place where the tailback begins, rather than from where traffic starts to move? Is it not true that no savings have been achieved and that, if it is measured properly, less traffic now uses the M4?

Mr. Hill: The fact is that there are significant time savings for drivers. It is worth noting two further positive aspects of the scheme. First, on current performance, there are benefits to the economy of £750,000 a year, which represents an excellent rate of return on an outlay of £1.9 million to cover the cost of the scheme. Secondly, although it is too early to draw firm conclusions, forecasts by safety experts predict a 20 per cent. reduction in accidents. The Metropolitan police, who manage the road, believe that the scheme has improved safety.

Cleaner Vehicles Task Force

16. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): When the cleaner vehicles task force is expected to issue a report on its findings. [99024]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): In July 1999, the cleaner vehicle task force published its first report, recommending practical measures to encourage the manufacture, purchase and use of cleaner, quieter, more fuel-efficient vehicles. The task force expects to publish another report in spring 2000. That report will take forward the key proposals and make further practical, cost-effective recommendations.

Dr. Gibson: Does my hon. Friend agree that investigations into alternative fuels and their benefits could do much for the health of our nation, especially in terms of the incidence of asthma and cancer?

Mr. Mullin: I certainly agree that that could make an important contribution to our constituents' quality of life. Two of the task force's earlier recommendations have already been acted on: first, the development of a greener fleet certification scheme for company cars and, secondly, the launch of an internet guide to enable purchasers of new cars to find out their carbon dioxide emissions and air quality impact. In addition, the task force has contributed to the development of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders label. I am pleased to announce that, from tomorrow, every new car will carry the label, which will give details of emissions of local pollutants and carbon dioxide.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): If the issue is one of quality of life and is worthy of an internet guide, why are the Government reducing the particulate emissions targets?

Hon. Members: Help!

Mr. Mullin: The House will be pleased to hear that help is on the way. There are difficulties with the European standards, but our finest minds are working on the problem.

Local Transport

17. **Mr. Geraint Davies** (Croydon, Central): What progress has been made in the development of local transport plans by local authorities. [99025]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): Local authorities have produced 85 local transport plans covering the whole of England outside London. We are currently assessing the plans and will announce the allocation of resources in December.

Mr. Davies: Will my hon. Friend give an assessment of the transport plans he has received covering the London area? Are any of them sustainable transport plans such as Croydon's, which includes tramlink and cycling measures? What consideration has he given to park-and-ride schemes, to ease congestion resulting from retail developments? Will he discuss with his colleagues the possible redesignation of greenfield sites, with the aim of preventing environmental damage by major retail developments alongside transport links?

Mr. Hill: Let me say at once that the Government's position on the green belt has already been clarified during these exchanges. All 33 authorities in London have produced interim transport plans, Croydon being one of them. We are assessing the plans and we shall announce the allocation of resources in December.

Beef on the Bone

3.30 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): With permission, I am pleased to be able to announce the Government's intention to lift the retail ban on beef on the bone. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hurrah!"] That seems to have gone down quite well. This follows further advice from the chief medical officers, who now collectively agree that it is possible to lift the ban on retail sales. I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health have accepted this advice. I am placing a copy of the advice in the Library today. Officials of my Department will later today be consulting on draft proposals to lift in England the ban on the retailing of beef on the bone. This includes lifting the ban on food prepared for direct sale to consumers in restaurants and other catering establishments. Similar consultations will be taking place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to lift the ban there also.

As recommended by the chief medical officers, the ban on the use of bones for manufacturing food products, including infant foods, which lies at the extreme end of BSE protection measures, will remain in place. This also has the effect of preserving explicit consumer choice.

This lifting of the ban has been long awaited and I am delighted that it can now go ahead. The announcement will bring a welcome boost to the beef industry in what continue to be difficult times. I believe that we need to move forward as quickly as possible with the consultation on the lifting of the ban. Therefore—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Back Benchers should listen to the end of the statement before condemning it. Therefore, subject to the consent of the House, I propose to use the accelerated procedure for making the regulations to allow retail sales to take place before Christmas. Consultation will start today, with the aim that the amending regulations will take effect on Friday 17 December. These proposals will take effect in England only, but it is intended that similar legislation will be implemented in the other parts of the United Kingdom to the same timetable.

I know that enforcement authorities will wish to take note of my statement and of the Government's clear intention to implement the lifting of the ban by 17 December.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I warmly welcome the statement and the very belated recognition by the Government that there is no justification whatever for a ban on beef on the bone.

I have five questions for the Minister. First, will he confirm that when the ban was imposed two years ago it was only one of three options put forward by the Government's scientific advisers, and that the first option was publication of the research findings and the risk assessment of beef on the bone so that consumer choice really could be preserved?

Secondly, will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the Government's compliance cost assessment shows that the ban has cost the industry more than £170 million since 1997?

Thirdly, will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that it is 10 weeks since the chief medical officer advised that retail sales of beef on the bone could safely restart? During that period, the industry has lost another £15 million.

Fourthly, why does the Minister consider it safe to lift the ban today, when it was not safe to do so on 21 September when the chief medical officer reported? Has the Minister allowed Scotland and Wales a veto over whether English consumers can buy beef on the bone?

Finally, is the Minister aware that one month ago, the agricultural counsellor at the French embassy said that Britain's ban on beef on the bone at home was one reason why France was blocking British beef exports? Will the Minister now admit that his failure to lift the ban more quickly has seriously damaged confidence in British beef abroad, and has made the task of regaining our export markets much more difficult?

Mr. Brown: I thank the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) for the unstinting welcome that he has given to my announcement. His judgment, or lack of it, on the issue is exceeded only by his failure to follow the debate. As I have said repeatedly in the House, the beef-on-the-bone ban has absolutely nothing to do with the date-based export scheme, because the date-based export scheme is, as everybody who has followed the debate knows, for deboned beef.

With regard to the advice given me earlier by the chief medical officer for the United Kingdom, not only did I say that I accepted it, as did the then Secretary of State for Health, but I put it in the House of Commons Library so that every hon. Member could see it. Most hon. Members took notice of it and could study the issue on the basis of professional advice.

We did not implement the advice just in England because the Government believe it right to proceed consistently throughout the United Kingdom. That is what we are doing today. It required the consent of others. We sought and obtained that consent, and now we are proceeding. There is nothing new in that. It has been the basis of discussion for several months, as the hon. Gentleman ought to know. As for the advice that was given to my predecessor, that has also been put in the public domain.

With regard to the hon. Gentleman's question about compliance cost assessment, that is not the basis on which Government policy is being driven. The Government's policy is being driven by the overriding desire to provide proper protection for the public. The test of whether we are doing so is whether we are acting on the basis of professional medical advice. We are willing to do so and to put the interests of the public first. As the hon. Gentleman has said repeatedly in the House, the current Conservative party leadership is not willing to do that.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the progress that he is making. Does he agree that if the Conservatives had won the last election, the likelihood is that the ban on our beef exports would have lasted for the duration of this Parliament?

On the BSE-linked controls on sheep carcases, will my right hon. Friend tell the House what prospect there is that the restrictions on the sale of carcases of sheep over one year old will be lifted? Does he accept that the resumption of the trade in whole sheep carcases would be welcomed in the Scottish industry and throughout the UK?

Madam Speaker: Order. The Minister has come to the House to make a statement about beef on the bone. I will

[Madam Speaker]

not allow him to answer questions in relation to other subjects. He has made a very restricted statement, and I hope that he will not stray from it when he answers the first part of the question.

Mr. Brown: My right hon. Friend is right. The Government have consistently followed scientific advice, and it is difficult to see how the Opposition could get any of the restrictions lifted in the institutions of the European Union if they are willing to put the scientific advice to one side.

Mr. Colin Breed (South–East Cornwall): We welcome the announcement that the ban will one day be lifted, and we hope that that will be on 17 December. We, like the farming community, would have preferred that to happen some months ago. I did not hear the Minister's answer to the question that the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) asked about costs. Will he confirm that the set-up costs for the ban were approximately £25 million and that about £77 million a year has been spent on maintaining it?

Will the Minister also confirm that the Ministry received advice that suggested that it was not assured of success if challenged in the European Court? However, because of probable delays, the Ministry was happy to go ahead with the ban because a challenge was unlikely to be issued within an acceptable time scale. If that is true, why did the Minister allow prosecutions to proceed against many people who sold beef on the bone, especially Mr. "Beefy" Bowman of the Drover's Inn, Harrogate, whose case is on-going although it is currently adjourned? Does he believe—

Madam Speaker: Order. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has many more questions? If so, perhaps he could make written representations.

Mr. Breed: I would be only too pleased to do so. Does the Minister believe that those prosecutions should be dropped without further ado, so that those who have cases hanging over them can get on with running their businesses?

Does the Minister agree with the Leader of the House of Lords that the ban was introduced for "purposes of European diplomacy"? If so, does he believe that £200 million has been well spent?

Mr. Brown: At least my correspondence section will be relieved that the hon. Gentleman managed to get all that out. European diplomacy has nothing to do with the ban. The Government have acted consistently on the advice of their professional advisers; we continue to do that.

On existing prosecutions, I emphasise that the Ministry is not the prosecuting authority. Cutting abattoirs are a matter for the Meat Hygiene Service and other issues are for local authorities to decide. They and the courts—not me—are responsible for enforcing the law.

Our policy is not fear driven. The Government's overriding priority is the protection of the public. The hon. Gentleman asked about the delay in lifting the ban. We have to go through parliamentary procedures to protect the rights of the Opposition. If they want to throw those rights away, that will be an amazing revelation to my right hon. Friend the Government Chief Whip, who will take careful note of it.

The hon. Gentleman is wrong to say that the ban will be lifted "one day"; it will be lifted on 17 December.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the news that the ban on beef on the bone will be lifted. That news will be welcome to small butchers in Chorley. When I go to Mr. Brown's shop every Saturday to buy my meat, he tells me that he hopes that the ban will be lifted. I can now give him that positive news.

Farmers as well as butchers in Chorley will welcome the news. They believe that agriculture is at the heart of Government policy and that the Government will support them through continued grants. We would welcome my right hon. Friend to Chorley; we hope that he will visit our farmers and ensure that we continue to support agriculture.

Mr. Brown: I hope to be able to visit my hon. Friend's constituency soon, once I have completed one or two other tasks. In the meantime, I know that the butchery trade will welcome the lifting of the ban, because the Government act on the best professional advice that is available to us and to other authorities in the United Kingdom. We are able to lift the ban throughout the United Kingdom, and thus ensure that the announcement is greeted with confidence by consumers as well as the industry.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): There is a serious business behind what is becoming a Whitehall farce. The Government legislated for devolution and under devolution it is expected that there should be different policies in different parts of the United Kingdom from time to time—otherwise, devolution would not exist. Was it thought necessary not to lift the ban in England—even though the Minister and his advisers were convinced that it should be lifted—because that was not acceptable in other parts of the United Kingdom? Will he ensure that he will not hesitate to act on behalf of the devolved interests of the English if a parallel case arises?

Mr. Brown: I am happy to act on the devolved interests of the English, as the right hon. Gentleman puts it, and I have asked the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin), to act within the Department as the Minister for England, as well as carrying out her other responsibilities. We decided not to proceed on an England-only basis because it is clearly in the interests of consumers, as well as the industry, to have a uniform pattern of regulation throughout the United Kingdom on this particular issue. Although it may be possible to act differently on a particular subject, that does not mean that one should seek to do so—especially if it is more rational to act together—and my discussions with my colleagues in the devolved Assemblies have been very mature on all these issues. Those discussions have gone well and we all agree that it is right to act, if we can, in the same way and to the same timetable across the United Kingdom.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on what he has achieved and urge him to ignore

the comments of Conservative Members—we would not be anywhere near this far along the line if we relied on their approach. I remind him that the ban on beef on the bone was imposed because of infectivity in the dorsal root ganglia and possible infectivity in the marrow. Can he assure the House that that has not been proved and that that is why he has been able to lift the ban?

Mr. Brown: I am able to raise the ban on retail sales and sales through catering establishments—direct sales—because that is the professional advice I have received. That advice is for all to see, because I have placed it in the Library today. My hon. Friend refers to the attitude of the Opposition, who seem to want to welcome the announcement and jeer it at the same time. They need a more mature strategy for dealing with those issues than merely jeering from the sidelines; and given how these circumstances were brought into being in the first place, a little humility might be appropriate.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): We are not jeering from the sidelines; we are condemning the Minister for having had the advice since September and doing nothing about it for England. If he is thinks that his logic about having to have uniformity for the whole of the United Kingdom makes any sense for my constituents in Devon, he is talking nonsense. Will he therefore give this country an undertaking that, if a similar situation arises, he will not be vetoed by the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly?

Mr. Brown: The right hon. Gentleman should now take a deep breath. The different authorities in the United Kingdom are acting in concert not because we have to, but because we want to.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement, which is consistent with sound scientific advice and administrative common sense. However, what guidance will he give the enforcement authorities in the consultation period until 17 December? He has correctly drawn attention to the fact that the Ministry is not the enforcement authority in these cases.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is on to a good point. I have asked the enforcement authorities to take careful note of today's statement and, in particular, of the fact that it is the Government's clear intention to have the ban lifted across the United Kingdom, in concert with the other authorities, by 17 December.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Will the Minister of Agriculture apologise to the House? Once again, we find that the House is being informed a long time after the press has been briefed on these matters, and it is a contempt of the House for the Government repeatedly to make announcements outside before making them to Members of Parliament.

Mr. Brown: I take that as a welcome for today's announcement. If the House is due an apology, surely it should come from those who presided over these circumstances in the first place.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity once and for all to explode the myth that was being peddled as the Conservative spokesman traipsed the radio and television studios this lunchtime in advance of this parliamentary announcement? He said that the beef-on-the-bone ban has hindered the lifting of the beef export ban. Is not the opposite the case? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that we would not have got the beef export ban lifted if we had ignored our official scientific advice? Does that not show that the Conservative party has learned nothing since it gave us BSE?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The date-based export scheme and the beef-on-the-bone ban are not related, because of the nature of the export scheme. This is a national interest and should not be a party political point. It does our country no favours to wander around the studios suggesting that there is a connection when there clearly is not.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): When will we get the truth from the Government, which is that two years ago they introduced an unnecessary ban when they had an option not to do so, because that was part of the chief medical officer's advice? When will they stop blaming the chief medical officer for their own lack of judgment? When will we get an apology from Ministers for wasting two years with an unnecessary ban that has caused damage not just to farmers, but to restaurateurs, hoteliers and caterers? Will Ministers be prepared to make reparations to the people whom they unnecessarily damaged?

Mr. Brown: I have complete confidence in the professional advice that I receive from the UK Government's professional advisers. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why not act on it?"] I am acting on it. The right hon. Gentleman asks when we will know the truth. I think that we will know the truth about the BSE tragedy, inasmuch as anyone ever can, once the inquiry reports.

Dr. George Turner (North–West Norfolk): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons the British public are eating more British beef than they did before BSE is that they now know that the Government will properly protect the consumer and will take sound medical advice, rather than play every food issue for petty party advantage?

Mr. Brown: Of course my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government's priority is to protect the consumer, and we do that by acting on professional advice.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Today's announcement is a bit late, but most welcome. Will the Minister concentrate on giving the Meat and Livestock Commission sufficient resources to ensure that it can work hard to recover the market that we have lost?

Mr. Brown: I agree with that. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I are meeting those most directly concerned with beef exports tomorrow to discuss the way forward.

Mr. Andy King (Rugby and Kenilworth): It is rich of Conservative Members to demand an apology from the

[Mr. Andy King]

Minister on this issue, which he has handled with enormous skill that is worthy of the support of the House. He has done remarkably well. I have not heard an apology from Conservative Members for BSE the whole time I have been in the House. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the House should receive an apology from Conservative Members for their mishandling of the BSE crisis?

Mr. Brown: I think that I can modestly agree with that. As for the apologies, we shall await the outcome of the BSE inquiry.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North–East Bedfordshire): Has the Minister no sense of urgency? Does he not realise that farmers in Bedfordshire, whether they are producing beef, poultry or pigs, are dying on their feet and watching him doing nothing week after week? We welcome this statement at last, but others who are watching their businesses go down the drain are looking for action. Please will he take it?

Mr. Brown: Farmers are indeed getting action today because I am lifting the ban. There is a parliamentary procedure to go through. We have such parliamentary procedures to protect the rights of the Opposition, which I would have thought the right hon. and learned Gentleman would be keener on now that he is that side of the House. The procedure that I am adopting, which I assume has the House's consent, is an accelerated procedure. I have also specifically drawn today's statement to the attention of the enforcement authorities.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I welcome the lifting of the ban, but will the Minister acknowledge that it caused serious damage to the reputation of the finest beef in the world—British beef? It also exposed a dangerous rift in Government over how questions of risk should be dealt with.

Now that the ban has gone, what steps is the Minister taking to re-examine the operation of the over-30-months scheme, particularly in respect of beef herds in which there has been no incidence of BSE, and in which the animals are fed on grass and are slow in maturing?

Mr. Brown: The first step is to receive advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, and I expect to receive it soon.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome for the lifting of the ban, but I fundamentally disagree with his point about damage to the beef industry. I believe that real and sustained damage would be done to the industry if the public could not have confidence in the public protection measures that enable me to say with confidence that British beef is among the safest in the world.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): As one who voted against the ban, I obviously welcome its lifting; but can the Minister reassure farmers in my constituency, especially given the falls in their incomes? He said in his statement that he continued to envisage difficult times, and, although it was a morale-boosting statement, there is a long way to go before the tragedy of BSE and the crisis in agriculture have been dealt with.

Mr. Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome for the statement. The right way forward for the beef industry is for it to provide a product that its customers want, and in which they can have confidence. That is why, given the tragedy of BSE, public protection measures are so important to consumers, and therefore to the industry itself.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid–Worcestershire): Does the Minister agree that there is more joy in heaven when one sinner repenteth, no matter how belated that repentance may be? Will he give an assurance on the subject of uniformity? This is something that I simply do not understand. Will he assure us that there will never again be a veto over English agricultural policy by the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly?

Mr. Brown: Theology is not my strong point, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the different authorities in the United Kingdom are acting in concert, because we all believe that it is right to do so. It is in the interests of consumers, and in the interests of the United Kingdom beef industry.

Mr. Yeo: The Minister says that the two-week delay in the lifting of the ban is intended to protect the rights of the Opposition. May I say on behalf of the Opposition that, in the interests of British consumers, we are willing to forgo those rights and approve the necessary order this afternoon?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman was not the leading or significant opposition that I had in mind. There may be real opponents of what I have announced today, and they should be given some time in which to have their say.

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath:

The right hon. Michael Denzil Xavier Portillo, for Kensington and Chelsea.

Points of Order

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South–East): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Are you able to clarify for the record exactly what the broadcasting procedures are for the Westminster Hall debating Chamber? This morning, the broadcasting proceedings were unavailable to other Members, or to our staff. Is it expected that they will be available, particularly on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings?

Madam Speaker: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the report, which records what the broadcasting should be. I would myself like to see the debates on our internal monitors. I am taking steps to find out whether we can have that for next week.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Have you had a request from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to come to the House today, given the shocking and, perhaps to some, distressing news that the euro is now worth only 99.04 US cents?

Madam Speaker: I have not been informed that anyone from the Treasury is seeking to make a statement on that, or on any other issue today.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Has the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food told you whether it will be sending a Minister to the Tea Room because, in today's evening paper, we were regaled with the headline:

"Beef on the bone ban is lifted"—

implying the past tense, half an hour before the statement to the House?

Madam Speaker: To the Tea Room? Is it to have a nice beef sandwich? I hope that if anyone is sent to the Tea Room for a beef sandwich, one will be sent to me in Speaker's House when I leave the Chair for a cup of tea.

Do I have another point of order? No? What a pity.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee (matters relating exclusively to Wales)),

That the matter of the Government's legislative programme as outlined in the Queen's Speech and the Chancellor's Pre-budget Report as they relate to Wales, be referred to the Welsh Grand Committee for its consideration.—[*Mr. Robert Ainsworth.*]

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Representation of the People Bill

[Relevant documents: The Fourth Report from the Home Affairs Committee, Session 1997–98, on Electoral Law and Administration (HC 768), and the Government response published in the Committee's Fourth Special Report, Session 1998–99, (HC 856).]

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I should inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

4.2 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It gives me great pleasure to bring before the House this Bill, which aims to modernise our electoral procedures. Much of our electoral legislation dates from the 19th century. The Bill will help to ensure that the procedures are suitable for the next century.

Let me tell the House something about the genesis of the Bill. Following every general election, the Home Office carries out a review to see what, in terms of electoral processes, went well and what could be improved. Previously, that has been purely an administrative exercise, but, following the 1997 general election, I decided that something more fundamental was needed.

Accordingly, I invited my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), then the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, to chair a working party to review all our electoral arrangements and to produce recommendations which

"will lead to more open and fairer electoral procedures, command the trust of the electorate and contribute to the democratic renewal of the United Kingdom."

The working party on electoral procedures, or the Howarth working party as it came to be known, included representatives of all the principal political parties, electoral administrators and representatives of local government. I am pleased to say that the working party was able to proceed by consensus and that, with a single exception, all its recommendations were agreed unanimously by all the representatives, including those of the three political parties. I hope that a similar spirit of co-operation will characterise our deliberations over the Bill. Electoral law is so fundamental to our democracy that changes to it should, wherever possible, proceed by consensus.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): How can we take the Home Secretary seriously on that point when we warned him that the system of election for the European Parliament that he was introducing would lead to an abysmal turnout? We were right. He ignored that advice, despite the measure being sent back from the Lords on numerous occasions, and we saw the lowest-ever turnout. How can we take the Government seriously about the turnout at local elections?

Mr. Straw: The Bill deals with the procedures for elections, which include the way in which we draw up the

[Mr. Straw]

register, the way in which people are able to cast their vote, arrangements for absent voting, the positioning of polling stations and matters relating to eligibility for voting. There is a difference between those issues and questions relating to electoral systems, which, as the hon. Gentleman and others will recall, we debated on six occasions. When I woke up this morning and heard reference to the d'Hondt system, I thought that I had gone back to a year ago. I am pleased to learn that d'Hondt's fine work last century has been put to even better effect in the arrangements for Northern Ireland than in the arrangements for the European elections.

It is difficult to argue that the changes to the voting system for the European elections led to an increase in turnout. I do not argue that. On the other hand, it is equally difficult to argue that a first-past-the-post system automatically leads to high turnouts. The by-elections at Leeds, Central and at Kensington and Chelsea—safe seats for Labour and the Conservatives respectively—had turnouts below 30 per cent.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: I will always, without exception, give way to my hon. Friend.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am deeply honoured that my right hon. Friend should be so kind, and I am very humble. Why does he not change back to the old first-past-the-post system for European elections to see whether that produces the result that we want?

Mr. Straw: I am not a one-Member Parliament. We live in a democracy. It is for humble Ministers such as me merely to make propositions and for this House and the other place to dispose of them. As I told the House during the passage of last year's Bill, we are reviewing the working of the system used for the European elections, and a report will be produced in due course.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): When the right hon. Gentleman analyses those statistics, it might be useful for him to look back to the European by-election in North-East Scotland, which took place just over six months before the European elections. That was conducted under the first-past-the-post system and the turnout was about the same.

Mr. Straw: I accept that point, which I was trying to make. Some people suggested that the change in the system for the European election would lead to an increase in turnout. I do not think that it is possible to argue that any more. I have never believed that the differences in turnout between us and continental countries are principally to do with the electoral system. They are to do with other factors.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, while it may seem attractive in principle to impose restrictions on the commercial use of the electoral register, the danger of clause 9 as it stands is that individuals who are excluded from that commercially available register, albeit by their choice, might find it difficult to obtain credit, as credit reference searches will be unable to locate them?

Mr. Straw: I shall come to that point. If the hon. Gentleman has more questions when I get to it, I shall give way again.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the system used in the European elections served one useful purpose of which we should take note? It taught us that under no circumstances should such a system be used for elections to this House. We have learned a very good lesson and I hope that my right hon. Friend agrees with it.

Mr. Straw: That is a persuasive point that needs to be borne in mind. The argument in favour of proportional representation for Westminster seems to be pursued with slightly less evangelism than before. I am not clear why that is the case.

The Howarth working party delivered its final report to me in October. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East and to all members of his working party for the thorough, informed and positive report that they have produced.

It may be helpful if I deal with the so-called reasoned amendment, tabled by the Opposition. It states that the House should decline to give a Second Reading to the Bill because

"the Government has failed to undertake a sufficiently comprehensive public consultation on such important and far-reaching changes to the conduct of elections and the publication of electoral registers".

The amendment claims also that

"Members of this House have had no time in which to consult with local authorities and interested parties in their constituencies".

This is one of the most disingenuous reasoned amendments that I have seen for a long time.

It may be helpful if I set out the extent to which we have engaged in consultation—not embarked on it—not only with the public, but with the Opposition. The working party, established in 1997, included a representative of the Conservative party, and that representative worked, and co-operated, with the working party.

In July 1998, the working party produced an interim report—which I published—which set out the provisional lines along which it was going and included most, although not all, of the issues raised in the final working party report. These included: rolling registration; disabled access to electoral procedures; electoral forms management; absent voting procedures; registration of parties; returning officers' fees and charges; broadcasting issues; and responses to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions consultation paper "Local Democracy and Community Leadership".

The report went on to explain other changes that the working party was to introduce, including a rolling electoral registration system; polling aides for the disabled; pilot schemes for voting anywhere in an electoral area; mobile voting; early voting; changes to voting hours and days; all-postal ballots and electronic voting.

Almost every issue in the final report was flagged up in the interim report. In addition, I remind the Conservative party that, alongside the Howarth working party, the Select Committee on Home Affairs sat at about the same time and held its own inquiry into electoral procedures. The Select Committee reported in September 1998, and its report has been available for public consultation ever since.

Conservative Front Benchers seem to have the most extraordinarily short memories. That may be because they keep changing—I am now on my fourth shadow Home Secretary in less than two and a half years. Written evidence was put into the Select Committee report, which went through a wide variety of issues—exactly those that are before the House today. In addition, the noble Lord Parkinson, of blessed memory, who was at the time the Conservative party chairman—

Mr. Bercow: A great man.

Mr. Straw: A very great man. Greater love hath no man for his party than to chair the Conservative party in the wake of its historic defeat in 1997 and still keep cheerful.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): And its great victory in 1983.

Mr. Straw: I pay tribute to that historic victory in 1983, from which we learned something. Lord Parkinson gave oral evidence to the Committee. For the fourth-time-around Conservative Front Benchers now to say that we have not entered into public consultation on the issue is simply nonsense.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On the subject of consultation, and further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), is it not the case that the working party did not include any representatives from the commercial or charitable sectors and that the problems raised by my hon. Friend would probably not have occurred had such representatives been consulted? Is it not the case that all those sectors were allowed to do was to make written representations?

Mr. Straw: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has asked me that question, because I was about to point out that, on the issue of the sale of the register, which is unquestionably one of the more contentious matters—but on which the Conservatives' representative agreed with the recommendations of the working party's report, which were the subject of considerable deliberation—the working party published a consultation paper in summer 1998 and invited representations on it. The working party received representations from the credit companies and other commercial interests, together with 90 letters written in response to a campaign run by the *Daily Express* against the free sale of the complete electoral register. No one can seriously argue that the possibility that changes would be made in the arrangements for the sale of the register were not fully the subject of public debate more than 15 months ago.

Mr. Bercow: The Home Secretary is not universally renowned for his competence, but he is known for his unfailing charm and courtesy. Therefore, within the privacy of the Chamber, I wish to ask him a simple question. Will he agree to a request from the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers, which comprises 300 member companies and a spend of more than £3 billion on media advertising, to a meeting at which it can air its concerns and release him from his state of ignorance on this important issue?

Mr. Straw: I take the half-compliment that the hon. Gentleman paid me in the spirit in which it was made. He is under a misapprehension, because it is not that I am in a state of ignorance but simply that I take a position with which he disagrees. The two are different, but it is the error of mistaking disagreement for ignorance that led the Conservatives to the historic defeat of which we spoke a moment ago.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware of the influence of Professor Bernard Crick's advisory group on education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy, which shows the importance of consultation. The group's report showed the need for change to re-engage young people, and there is no better example of the need for the changes proposed in the Bill.

Mr. Straw: Before I deal with my hon. Friend's point, I wish to answer the direct question put by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). I cannot give an undertaking to the organisation to which he referred that I will be able to meet its representatives, but my hon. Friend the Minister has already met representatives of several commercial groups and will be available to meet those of that organisation, should we receive a request from it.

I shall now summarise for the House what the Bill contains but, before I do so, I shall just mention what is not in it. Hon. Members will be aware that there will be another piece of electoral legislation this Session—the political parties, elections and referendums Bill. That Bill will give effect to the Neill committee recommendations on party funding and, very importantly, create an electoral commission. A draft Bill for that was published in July.

The working party recommended legislative changes in three main areas—electoral registration, absent voting and pilot schemes—that are covered in the Bill before us today, and I will deal with them in turn. Much of our legislation governing electoral registration dates from the end of the first world war and while, in general, it has served us well, it no longer reflects the needs of modern society. The rules were drawn up when only a minority of the adult population were eligible to be registered and when, for the most part, people lived in one place for most, if not the whole, of their lives.

We now have a very mobile population with up to a tenth of people moving house in any one year. It is plainly absurd that someone who moves to a new address just after the 10 October qualifying date has to wait 16 months—until February of the year after the next year—before being able to vote in respect of their new address. That can only have a harmful effect on turnout. People are prevented from voting for the local authority in the area where they live and have little interest in voting for the local authority in the place where they no longer live.

That is why, on the working party's recommendation, we are introducing a system of rolling electoral registration. This will allow the register to be updated

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constantly, so that people can be added to the register and deleted from it as soon as they move. The aim is to ensure that not more than about six weeks elapse between the date when people move and inform the electoral registration officer of their move and their inclusion on the register.

There will still need to be an annual canvass and safeguards to ensure that nobody is disfranchised by being left off the register. That change should ensure that every future election is conducted using a much more up-to-date register. I hope that the whole House will welcome this measure.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): We certainly welcome it, and pay tribute to the hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who has, rightly, pressed this case for many years.

Will the Home Secretary consider a proposition that relates specifically to the proposed annual registration period? There is a good biblical precedent for the date of the census being one that people are reminded of publicly. A census is taken every 10 years; will the right hon. Gentleman consider having a co-ordinated national strategy for advertising annually the desirability and opportunity of registration? This happens locally, and there is some advertising, but as it is a bit piecemeal and half cocked, it does not often achieve its objective.

Mr. Straw: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman paid tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). If he had not talked about the need for a rolling register for so long, and with such cogency, this proposal might not now be before the House.

I take the hon. Gentleman's point that publicity arrangements have not been particularly well co-ordinated. It is not passing the buck to say that we will look at the matter before the electoral commission is established but, once it is established, one of its important functions will be to upgrade the way in which the opportunities to vote, and therefore to register, are drawn to people's attention.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid–Dorset and North Poole): Will the Home Secretary take this opportunity to apologise to those hereditary peers who were thrown out in the other place and disfranchised in the recent by-election in Kensington and Chelsea, given that the right hon. Gentleman gave an assurance in the House that they would have the right to vote?

Mr. Straw: I am not going to apologise for that. We are trying to have a serious discussion about electoral registration. It did not seem to make a huge amount of difference to the result.

Mr. Fraser: That is not the point.

Mr. Straw: It would have been the point if it had done—the hon. Gentleman can rest assured of that. We considered very carefully whether it was possible to introduce the arrangements in time, and it was not. That was the only reason.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I wish to make some progress, and I will give way later.

The Bill will also make it easier for the homeless, remand prisoners, mental patients—other than those detained as a consequence of criminal activity—and service personnel to register. All such people are entitled to vote, but our rigid and cumbersome registration rules can make it difficult for them to register. That is an important point to bear in mind.

Partly to overcome that, the Bill introduces a new concept, a "declaration of local connection", which will enable people to register in respect of an address with which they have a connection. Remand prisoners and mental patients will also be permitted to register in respect of the address where they would otherwise be living.

I know that the Conservative representative on the working party had reservations about the proposals for the homeless. That was the only one of the working party's representations that did not secure unanimous support. I do not believe that our approach will lead to electoral fraud or to improper registration. I am sure that we will discuss this in greater detail in Committee, and hope that we can find a solution that will be acceptable to all parties. I did note that, in the Conservative party's written evidence to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, the idea of allowing homeless people to register was not ruled out altogether. Instead, the suggestion was that, to ensure that homeless people were not deprived of their right to vote, pilot schemes should be tested in a number of areas.

From that, I take it that no huge issue of principle exists between the Conservative party and other parties about whether homeless people should be entitled to vote, and that the issue is one of practicality and the avoidance of fraud. I hope that that matter can be considered in Committee.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Does the Home Secretary accept the working party's view that the proposal could be open to abuse? Is he satisfied that the Bill is strong enough to deal with potential abuse, or is he saying that he will welcome amendments to strengthen the likelihood that there will be no abuse of the provision?

Mr. Straw: I have never come to the House to say that a proposal in a Bill is the last word and is not capable of being improved. I do not do so now. As I said, no issue of principle exists between the parties. The question is whether the safeguards will work. Parliament would not be doing its job if such questions were not examined in great detail. If the Opposition table amendments to strengthen the Bill, we will be happy to consider them.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I am sure that the Home Secretary will agree that the principle of trying to extend the franchise and of ensuring that it reaches homeless people unites both sides of the House. However, evidence that is more than anecdotal suggests that personation takes place with regard to people who, for example, are temporarily resident in hostels. We are

worried about the difficulty that might arise if the franchise were extended to the homeless, not about the principle behind the Government's desire to ensure that everyone entitled to a vote has one. I am sure that all parties share that aim.

Mr. Straw: I understand that. There is a separate problem of personation in respect of people residing in hostels, and of some other people. The working party made no recommendation that proxy voting be facilitated, but the Bill proposes to facilitate postal voting, which offers fewer opportunities for fraud.

Mr. Fabricant: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for his generosity in giving way to me a second time. He mentioned earlier that 10 per cent. of the voting population is in the process of moving home at any one time. By a rough calculation, I estimate that that proportion amounts to about 4 million voters. How would the right hon. Gentleman convince the House that multiple voting or personation would not take place as a result of so many registrations being made over such a short period?

Mr. Straw: There is every opportunity for multiple voting at present.

Mr. Fabricant: Will not the Bill make that worse?

Mr. Straw: I do not think so. Multiple voting is a dangerous practice, as the chances of being caught are fairly high.

Mr. Fabricant: Two areas are involved.

Mr. Straw: I am aware of that, but the same person has to be on the register in both areas. Moreover, that person—or someone personating him or her—then has to go and vote. A further criminal offence would be committed if that person voted on behalf of someone else.

Many people are registered in two places at once, including most Members of Parliament. I know that we are honourable, but I want to answer the question seriously. I am not aware of any serious suggestion—or evidence—that the fact that people can be registered in two places at once has led them to commit the abuse of voting in two places at once.

I do not believe that the rolling register changes will produce the abuse that has been suggested by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). If he wants to make suggestions to improve the process, he should table amendments in Committee.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The Home Secretary is right to say that various people are able to register in two places, including Members of Parliament and students. What sort of cross-checking is done after an election to determine whether a person has voted in two different places?

Mr. Straw: I personally have not entered into any such cross-checking. Like all hon. Members, I am aware of concerns about personation in respect of proxy votes in certain constituencies and council wards. Generally, if there is some abuse, we become aware of it. I am not aware of problems with people being registered at two different addresses and voting twice.

A number of hon. Members have mentioned the recommendation of the working party, which was agreed unanimously—including by the Conservative representative—that the full electoral register should no longer be made available for general sale and use.

As the law stands, anyone may buy a copy of the electoral register for any purpose. The Home Office and electoral administrators receive more complaints about that than any other subject. People are unhappy about the large amount of unsolicited mail—junk mail—from companies that have obtained their details from the electoral register.

Perhaps more worryingly, the advent of powerful CD-Roms compiled from the electoral register, which allow for searching by name, means for example that abusive spouses can trace their former partners with considerable ease using a single CD-Rom. People who feel threatened in that way may simply not dare to register.

All of that, together with the requirements of the European Union data protection directive, which was signed and agreed by the previous Administration and, generally, of the right to privacy, led the working party to conclude that it was wrong that people should be under a statutory obligation to provide their details for electoral registration purposes and then have no say about whether that information could be used for other unrelated purposes.

The working party recommended that there should be a box on the electoral registration form and people should be given the right to opt out of having their names included in the register that is for sale. In effect, there would be two versions of the register: a full one, which could be used for electoral purposes and would also be available for law enforcement purposes; and, an edited version, which would be for sale and would contain only the names of those who had not opted to be excluded from it. Clause 9 allows for regulations for that purpose to be made.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I will continue if I may, as I have given way a great deal.

At the same time, we are conscious that the banking and finance industries make extensive use of the electoral register for money laundering and identity checks and that it is also an important factor in deciding who should be granted credit. In drawing up the regulations, we shall clearly need to balance the needs of those industries with privacy and data protection concerns.

I can, of course, assure the House that a full regulatory impact assessment will be made to accompany those regulations. We will also be able to discuss that in more detail in Committee.

Mr. Robathan: There is also the question of security. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned abusive spouses, but many people do not want their names on the register for other reasons. Indeed, as he will be aware, some hon. Members do not want to be on it because of terrorism.

[Mr. Robathan]

Under the proposed arrangement, will it be possible for anyone to gain access to the register without buying it? I see that there is some mention of people being able to study the register, so will they be able to study it at the town hall if they so wish?

Mr. Straw: Yes, that would be possible. There is no perfect balance in these matters. The full register, which is published for electoral purposes, would be available in town halls. Moreover, as would be expected, we plan to make the full register available to political parties—we are bound to. Therefore, the full text will be available. At the same time, our proposal—subject to the House agreeing the Bill and, later, the regulations—is that the full register should not be commercially available for sale, and that is right and proper.

We are seeking to square the circle, by ensuring that full copies of the register are available to banks to check on money laundering and to credit rating agencies so that they can check whether people are living at the address that they claim.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I will make progress, as many hon. Members wish to speak.

On absent vote arrangements, again much of the thinking that underpins our procedures dates back to a different age, when it was reasonable to assume that every registered voter would be in the constituency on polling day and, apart from the physically infirm, would be able to get to the polling station in person. That may have been possible before the war, but in the busy, mobile society of today, that clearly is not the case. We have all noted, when on the doorstep, the fact that a high proportion of people are away on the day of an election, and have not been able to make arrangements for an absent vote. Our absent vote arrangements should reflect modern reality—currently, they do not do so.

Following the recommendations of the working party, the Bill offers proposals for the modernisation of absent vote arrangements. It makes it possible for people to apply for an absent vote for a defined period; that should be of use to someone who, for example, takes up a three-year posting involving much travel.

The working party made several recommendations in relation to postal votes that we intend to adopt. As I pointed out earlier, I refer only to postal votes—not to proxy votes, where we are concerned about the potential for malpractice. The Bill will allow for postal votes on demand. Anyone who wants a postal vote will be able to receive one, without having to satisfy any particular criteria.

We intend to simplify the rules governing the issue and return of postal ballot papers. As someone who has a postal ballot, even I sometimes find it a challenge to decide into which envelope I should put which bit of paper. Some of my hon. Friends may find that task easier—*[Interruption.]* However, my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall)—the intelligence and perspicacity of Whips goes before them—tells me that the matter is complicated. It should not be complicated, but it is—the forms look as though they have not been redesigned for 60 or 70 years. If the process is irritating—the modern phrase is challenging—for Members of the House, we should realise how much more difficult it is for someone who is not used to such form filling or whose eyesight is not good. People become muddled and confused. At every general election, some postal votes are disqualified because the forms have been put into the wrong envelopes, or because some other minor error has been made. We intend to simplify the rules for the physical process of the postal ballot.

This is a good opportunity to mention one group of absent voters—those registered as overseas electors. Schedule 2 replaces the existing provisions of the Representation of the People Act 1985 that provide for the registration of overseas electors. However, the only changes to be made are those required to reflect the fact that, with the introduction of rolling electoral registration, there will no longer be a single annual qualifying date. Accordingly, the new measures retain the existing provision that a person may be registered as an overseas elector for up to 20 years after leaving the United Kingdom.

I am well aware of the fact that some people think that the period should be reduced—not least the members of the Select Committee on Home Affairs. The Committee's fourth report on electoral law and administration contained the unanimous recommendation that

"we take the view that the twenty year maximum period within which a British citizen overseas may retain the right to vote is excessive and that the earlier limit—five years—should be restored."

However, the Bill is intended to implement the recommendations of the Howarth working party and, as I pointed out earlier, the working party was agreed on all particulars except the practical issue of the registration of homeless people.

I want the Bill to go through the House with as great a consensus as possible, and as quickly and smoothly as possible. I point out to those of my hon. Friends who may want to table amendments on registration that there will be much more vigorous discussion of that matter when we introduce the political parties, elections and referendums Bill—parts of which will be more contentious than this Bill, not least because the issue of how long a person may remain on the register is obviously closely tied to that of who may make a donation to a political party. Amendments on that matter can be tabled to the political parties Bill. Meanwhile, as the 20-year arrangement was introduced in 1989 with all-party consensus, I hope that discussions can be held between the parties to determine whether there is a consensus for change. I do not say that the Government would proceed only if there were consensus, but I do say that, obviously, it would be better if there were.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, when the overseas vote was first introduced, when I was shadow Home Secretary, it was not done at all on the basis of consensus? The Conservative Government imposed it on us. It was opposed—

Mr. Greenway: We have the *Hansard* report—the right hon. Gentleman is wrong.

Mr. Kaufman: I was shadow Home Secretary at the time. The hon. Gentleman does not need to tell me what

I lived through. It was imposed, and the five-year period was incorporated only because I protested against the seven years.

The introduction of the 20-year period did not take place on the basis of consensus, either. The Conservatives wanted 25 years, and the Opposition managed to whittle them down. What we had was salami tactics in reverse. I simply do not understand why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will not accept the amendments that I shall certainly move and, if necessary, press to a Division.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that.

Mr. Greenway: That will be helpful.

Mr. Straw: My right hon. Friend is always helpful—on this. I certainly do not think that the Bill is the appropriate vehicle for that change, because we want to get the Bill through as quickly as possible, and the Bill has the discrete purpose of giving effect to the proposals of the Howarth working party.

On the other changes that were made, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) mentioned, I have before me the report of the proceedings in July 1989, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, Central (Mr. Darling)—now Secretary of State for Social Security—moved an amendment to reduce the period from 25 years to 20 years. That was at a time when, I believe, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton was not shadow Home Secretary but shadow Foreign Secretary. Those changes were made. As I said, if we can proceed by consensus, we will. If we cannot, the Government will consider the matter further.

I shall now discuss the working party's recommendations for pilot schemes. We all have pet theories as to what might improve turnouts, such as weekend voting, all-postal ballots, mobile polling stations, electronic voting and other wheezes. The simple truth is that none of us knows what, if anything, will make a difference. Therefore, the working party set great store by pilot schemes.

Under clause 10, local authorities will be able to apply to run pilot schemes of innovative electoral procedures.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): The Home Secretary is no doubt aware that one idea that does not increase voter turnout is mobile polling stations. He will be aware that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions conducted an experiment in my constituency in the London borough elections in 1998. It placed a mobile polling station in a polling district in Purley ward. In that polling district, turnout dropped from the highest to the lowest in the ward. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Straw: I did not hear that quip, but it may have been on account of the candidates.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): Does my right hon. Friend agree that many of the innovative ideas require a national approach and significant investment in technology, and that local authorities, which would be required to cover the costs of pilot schemes, may not feel that they are a priority, given that they have to cover so many other areas—generous though the Government have been to local government on these issues? Does my right hon. Friend agree that the issue is so important that the Government must take a lead, by saying what they can do nationwide, and perhaps even by considering the use of national lottery terminals? That would benefit my constituency, where Camelot and GTech are based.

Mr. Straw: GTech also owns an important company in my constituency, so we have a joint interest in that matter.

A great many of these changes would not involve any great cost. Weekend voting would involve some additional overtime. All-postal ballots would not incur a huge cost. Mobile polling stations might work. There was great concern in my constituency when a mobile polling station was removed, because that left the area without a polling station, so turnout certainly decreased there.

On electronic voting, it is probable that the commercial firms that are interested in selling equipment and software to local authorities may wish to loan them as part of the pilots. As ever, resources are limited, and I point out to my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Ms Ward) that we shall have to make hard choices. I dare say that, in the event, local authorities will not find that lack of resources is a huge impediment to running pilots if they decide to do so.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): The Home Secretary mentioned weekend voting. Will he elaborate on where the pilot schemes will take place? Will they be run by local authorities? He should be aware that, in many areas, especially in my constituency and in the highlands and islands, Sunday voting would not be welcomed. We must be careful of going down that road.

Mr. Straw: I am very conscious of that point. Piloting weekend voting will be a matter for local authorities. If weekend voting ever became part of the national arrangements, we would have to ensure that it took place on both days. There are members of the Jewish community who would not wish to vote on a Saturday and there are members of other communities, including the one that the hon. Lady represents, who have strong feelings about the observance of the Sabbath. Sunday voting would not be acceptable to them. I understand the point that she makes.

I wish to make progress and to draw my remarks to a close. I have mentioned some of the ideas that could form the basis of pilot schemes. However, let me make it clear that there is not a prescribed list. Local authorities are free to suggest any innovation that they want and all well-thought-out proposals will be considered.

Local authorities will need to demonstrate that they have made proper plans to run the pilots and that the integrity of the poll is properly preserved. They will also have to show that they have in place plans for a full evaluation of the pilot scheme. Such evaluations will need to assess the turnout in the authority where the pilot is running as compared with previous elections and with similar authorities where pilot schemes are not running. They will also need to seek views on the success or otherwise of the scheme from candidates, parties and, most importantly, the electorate.

Clause 11 provides for any scheme that has been successfully piloted to be rolled out nationally. Any such changes will be made by orders, which will be subject to

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the affirmative resolution procedures in both Houses. It is, as I have made clear, the Government's hope that the Bill will receive a fair wind in its passage through Parliament. If it does, it should be possible to run the first pilot schemes at next May's local authority elections.

The Howarth working party was rightly much concerned with the problems faced by disabled voters. It made a number of recommendations on that subject, several of which do not require legislation. However, the Bill makes three important innovations. The first is that returning officers should be required to display a large print version of the ballot paper in the polling station. Secondly, blind and partially sighted electors should be able to vote using a template. Thirdly, in addition to blind voters having the right to be assisted in voting by a companion, we shall extend the facility to cover all voters with physical disabilities that are such that they cannot vote unaided and to aid those who are unable to read.

Finally, I should mention the one provision in the Bill that does not arise from a recommendation of the Howarth working party. However, I do not anticipate it to be controversial across the Chamber. It relates to the problems that arose in the European parliamentary elections earlier this year when allegations were made that some candidates deliberately gave false addresses on their nomination papers. I cannot comment on the substance of those allegations, but the legal advice that I have received is that people who provide false particulars are not, as the law stands, committing a criminal offence. That seems to me to be plainly wrong, so we propose to close that loophole.

I do not believe, and I am sure that no Member of the House believes, that the Bill will arrest and reverse the decline in turnout at all levels of election. Whatever the electoral procedures are, people will vote only if they are interested in the body being elected and feel that it is worth while to vote. So long as we do not have compulsory voting, people in our democracy have the right not to vote as much as they have the right to vote. Nevertheless, this is an important Bill. We need to ensure that it is as easy as possible for the public to vote and that our electoral procedures are compatible with modern life styles.

We were elected with a clear mandate to modernise our constitution and the Bill forms an important part of that programme. The Bill may not appear to be as exciting as devolution, human rights or freedom of information, but I suggest that it is just as important. Fair and free elections are the centrepiece of our democratic structures, from which everything else flows.

The Bill will help to achieve modern, effective electoral procedures, and I commend it to the House.

4.50 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Representation of the People Bill because the Government has failed to undertake a sufficiently comprehensive public consultation on such important and far-reaching changes to the conduct of elections and the publication of electoral registers, because Members of this House have had no time in which to consult with local authorities and interested parties in their constituencies, because only one month has elapsed since the publication of the report of the Home Office Working Party on Electoral Procedures whose recommendations the Bill is designed to implement, and because more careful consideration of the costs and long-term implications of the measures contained in the Bill is required."

The Bill is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Its principles may seem benign and unobjectionable, but the devil is in the detail. The Bill could have far-reaching consequences beyond those intended by the working party whose recommendations the Bill seeks to implement. Indeed, the Government propose that the House should write the Home Secretary a blank cheque to amend the rules not only for local elections but for future parliamentary elections. The Bill could therefore pave the way for changes to the conduct of a general election about which there has been no discussion on the Floor of the House or in the wider community, which would be affected.

I should point out to the Home Secretary that the recommendations published by the working party on electoral procedures in July referred only to pilot schemes at local elections. The word "parliamentary" arises nowhere in those recommendations. It was only when we received the final report, which was published only a month ago, that the question of rolling out the changes to parliamentary elections first arose.

On top of that, the way in which the Government seek to implement some of the working party's recommendations increases the prospect of electoral fraud, impersonation and undue influence on the outcome of an election where it is conducted over several days.

There appears to have been no discussion with religious communities about voting on days of religious significance—a point raised by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) in an intervention on the Home Secretary a moment ago. Yet the Home Secretary will recall the debate a year or so ago, during proceedings on the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999, in which many Members on both sides of the House said that they regarded with great distaste the prospect of voting on a Sunday in the European parliamentary elections.

Furthermore, although well intentioned, the proposals to restrict the legitimate use of the electoral register by businesses and others, including charities, political parties and, on occasion, Departments, will lead to increased social exclusion from financial services and increased cost to British business and commerce. The Government have completely failed to address that cost by neglecting to produce a regulatory impact assessment.

Only a few minutes ago, I was handed a copy of a written answer, received today, to a question tabled to the Prime Minister by my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins). He asked the Prime Minister if the Home Office had been given an exemption from his instruction to all Departments to undertake and publish a regulatory impact study of the financial and other effects of all proposed Government legislation, with particular reference to the Representation of the People Bill. With characteristic clarity, the Prime Minister replied that he will reply to the hon. Member shortly. So, on Second Reading, the Government cannot even tell us when they even gave thought to the need for a regulatory impact assessment.

For those reasons, and others, we believe that, before asking Parliament to approve the measures, the Government should have initiated a comprehensive public

consultation on the working party's recommendations; that, in turn, would have allowed right hon. and hon. Members the fullest possible opportunity to discuss the implications of such far-reaching proposals with the people they represent: local government, local electors and businesses in their constituency. Over the past 10 days or so, since the Bill was published, I have asked colleagues on both sides of the House whether they realise what the Bill contains. It is fascinating to hear their short, sharp, clear answer: no. When they discover the Bill's contents, they will realise that its effects are more far-reaching than the Home Secretary has implied.

The Conservatives are not opposed in principle to the concept of ensuring that more people have the opportunity to vote and electors are encouraged to vote, whether by making changes to the technicalities of registration or by introducing more flexible voting arrangements. In that respect, the intention underlying the working party's report was well directed. Our problem is with the Government's decision to transpose those ideas, in only a few short weeks, into detailed legislation. In his intervention, the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) implied that, by tradition, such proposals have required detailed negotiation between parties, so as to achieve consensus before proceeding with a Bill.

I am slightly surprised that the Home Secretary did not mention the matter I am about to raise—perhaps it is to his credit that he did not. He has said that he wrote to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) in September—in fact, he referred to that matter during a recent Opposition day debate—but he has accepted that my right hon. Friend did not receive the letter. We received a faxed copy of the letter late last night, but the date on it is 20 September, not "months and months" previously, as the Home Secretary claimed on 23 November.

Mr. Straw: Of course I accept the right hon. Lady's assertion that she had not seen the letter—plenty of letters sent to me are received by the Home Office but not seen by me. However, the right hon. Lady might not know that my office phoned her office more than once to ask for a reply, only to be told that a reply would be forthcoming in due course. It was not that we wrote and simply left the matter at that; I was genuinely interested in the response.

Mr. Greenway: I do not want to labour the point. The purpose of mentioning the letter will become clear shortly.

Mr. Straw: What is it?

Mr. Greenway: I shall tell the right hon. Gentleman in a moment—he must be patient. However, in response to his explanation, I should point out that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald says that her office asked the Home Secretary's office for a copy of the letter, but copy came there none, until the faxed copy was received last night. Overnight, we have examined the letter with some interest.

The letter merely restates the objectives and conclusions of the working party; it does not mention the detail of the Bill. Therefore, even had we received the letter, it would hardly have constituted a thorough consultation. The importance of the letter is that we can deduce precisely from it the Government's intention of making changes to the conduct of general elections. That is clear where in the letter the Home Secretary states that he would like

"the first pilot schemes . . . to be run in the May 2000 local elections. This would make it possible for any innovations which prove to be particularly successful to be in place nationally in time for the next general election."

The timetable for the next general election is clear. If we did not already know that the Prime Minister had already pencilled in the election for 2001 from his behaviour—standing down many aspects of Government policy that are proving unpopular with voters, from speed limits to the number of houses to be built in the south-east—the Home Secretary's letter certainly lets the cat out of the bag. He wants to have pilot schemes in place for May 2000.

Mr. Straw: That is stretching it.

Mr. Greenway: We are not stretching it at all.

Applications from local authorities will have to be lodged by 17 January. The measures contained in the pilots will then be extended to the general election in the following year. We do not need to pose the question why the Government are proceeding with such unseemly haste; their mind is already made up.

Ms Ward: It is bizarre that the hon. Gentleman is objecting to sensible measures to move forward quickly. People are entitled to have every opportunity to vote as soon as possible. Only a Government who were not interested in increasing voter turnout and increasing opportunities for voters would delay any longer on those matters. If the hon. Gentleman had any sense of purpose as a member of the Conservative party, the previous Conservative Government would have introduced such measures a long time ago.

Mr. Greenway: The hon. Lady has walked straight into the trap that my comments had set. At this juncture I intended to ask the Home Secretary whether he agrees with the letter that was sent to all hon. Members today by the Local Government Association, with a briefing. I am sure that all hon. and right hon. Members will have studied it with great interest. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with the association that there should be

" proper independent evaluations before experiments are rolled out to all authorities"?

That recommendation relates only to local elections, not to parliamentary elections.

If we have misunderstood, perhaps the Home Secretary will tell us what time scale he has in mind for the implementation of some of the proposals at a general election. His letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald makes it abundantly clear that we are talking about giving him the power in clause 11 to extend to parliamentary elections within the next 18 months or so arrangements which were first proposed by a working party as being effectively for local elections, with no proper evaluation of what is required. In her earlier intervention on the Home Secretary, the hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) said that local authorities have no money to carry out the pilots in any event, which adds to our concern about what the Government have in

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mind. That explains why we are sceptical about the Government's unseemly haste. There needs to be more informed consideration.

Mr. Fabricant: As for the evaluation of the pilot schemes, was my hon. Friend as surprised as I was to learn from the Home Secretary that no audit is carried out after a general election to ascertain whether there has been multiple voting in different areas? If no such work is done after general elections, given the importance of those elections, what can we expect from the pilot schemes?

Mr. Greenway: I am delighted that my hon. Friend intervened because he makes a telling point. In a way, he has anticipated my next point. A much more important development to which the Home Secretary referred, which in our view should inform the attitude to the Bill, is the proposed creation of an electoral commission. In his belated response to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, the right hon. Gentleman said that that would be the body

"to highlight any deficiencies in electoral law and administration"—

my hon. Friend's point is valid—

"and to make recommendations for improvements."

Surely it would have been sensible to wait for the electoral commission to be established and allow it the opportunity to undertake a comprehensive review of all electoral arrangements, and not take the piecemeal approach that the right hon. Gentleman has adopted. As it is, if the Bill is enacted in its present form, many changes will have been made by the time that the commission is in business and the door will be closed after the horse has bolted.

Another matter that we want to raise with the Home Secretary is his attitude to the Home Affairs Committee, which he mentioned in respect of overseas voters. He knows that the Bill is not entirely on all fours with the recommendations of that Committee. For example, the Committee recommended that electors with dual registration should be required to specify where they intended to vote. That could well be relevant to the proposal for a local declaration.

It does not need much imagination to work out that somebody could be on an electoral register with a fixed address in one part of the country, and subsequently end up on the electoral register in another part because of a local declaration, yet the Government remain to be convinced.

The Home Affairs Committee thinks that a rolling register needs improved information technology. We know that IT systems are not the Home Office's strongest point or its top-drawer performance. The Government's response, none the less, is typically woolly.

Because the Home Secretary has decided to adopt a piecemeal approach, and because the Bill pre-empts any work on those topics by the electoral commission, the process is wide open to hon. Members on all sides to advance amendments in respect of their own pet ideas.

The Home Secretary referred to the report that his hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) had one such amendment in mind, and he prayed in aid support from the Home Affairs Committee in that respect. However, the Home Secretary must explain why he agrees with the Select Committee only when it suits him.

The Home Secretary was referring to the time limit for overseas voting. He stated in a letter, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald did receive, that he was considering reducing the time limit for overseas registration to just five years, which is what the hon. Member for Battersea has in mind. The Home Secretary said that if he was persuaded of the merit of such a measure—which still leaves the question open—he would introduce it in the forthcoming Bill on party funding.

We welcome the strong hint that the right hon. Gentleman gave at the Dispatch Box during his speech that he does not believe that this Bill is the right vehicle for such a measure. We urge him to make a firm pledge to that effect. I am sure that he would accept that including such a reduction in this Bill would undermine the attempts on both sides to reach a consensus on the proposed changes. I am delighted that we have that on the record.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. When he and his hon. Friends received the letter about the possible reduction for overseas registration from 20 years to five years, did they express an opinion? Did they oppose the proposal at that stage, or have they simply decided in the past few days to oppose it?

Mr. Greenway: I shall come on to that. It is remarkable how the interventions anticipate my next point.

Before the Home Secretary finally makes up his mind, may I ask him to reconsider the attitude of his party when the 20-year rule was agreed in 1989? The *Official Report* clearly shows that the 20-year proposal was introduced not by Conservative Ministers, but by his right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, Central (Mr. Darling), who was then a shadow Home Office spokesman and is now a senior Cabinet Minister. He was supported, in the vote as well, by the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), then shadow spokesman for Scotland and now its First Minister.

The right hon. Member for Gorton was shadow Home Secretary at the time. His recollection seems to be that the measure was forced upon the Opposition and was the best that they could do, but that is not how the *Hansard* report reads. The right hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central said:

"We believe that a period of five years was unduly restrictive, especially as it is now clear that a number of people will leave this country perhaps to take up work in Europe or in other parts of the world but will still maintain a lively interest in the affairs of this country."

He went on to say:

"I believe that 20 years is a sensible compromise".—[*Official Report*, 5 July 1989; Vol. 156, c. 411.]

I could not have put it better myself.

Mr. Kaufman: I was not shadow Home Secretary at the time; that post was held by my noble Friend Lord Hattersley. I opposed even a five-year period; my noble Friend accepted a 20-year period before he rediscovered socialism.

Mr. Greenway: I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman for ascribing the wrong job and the wrong views to him in opposition. The effect of returning to the Back Benches is amazing; hon. Members can make up their own minds there. I am sure that his views will not find favour with his Front Benchers; they certainly do not find favour with Conservative Members.

The views of the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central, which I have just quoted, were right. What was true in 1989 remains true. I heard the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) being interviewed on the "Today" programme at the end of last week. He said that Baroness Thatcher, who was Prime Minister in 1989, had not forced the decision on the House, and there had been all-party consensus about it.

Mrs. Llin Golding (Newcastle–under–Lyme): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: In a moment.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey should reflect on the words of the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), who was in favour of no limit, not even 25 years. That view has some merit. Many British people work here all their lives and have families here, but retire abroad for health reasons. They draw their pensions from Britain and maintain a keen interest in the politics of this country.

Mrs. Golding *rose—*

Ms Ward *rose—*

Mr. Greenway: I shall give way in a second.

The case that was made 10 years ago remains valid. No case has been made for a reduction, which was not a working party recommendation.

Mrs. Golding: I was the Opposition Whip when the issue was debated in 1989. I told Labour Members that the choice was between 20 years or 25 years, which the Tories wanted. That is why Labour Members went into the Lobby when many, including me, did not want to vote for the 20-year rule.

Mr. Greenway: It is amazing—we are hearing about all the jobs that hon. Members held in the past. The Government of the day would not have proceeded with the Bill without all-party agreement on all the issues. The right hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central said in 1989 that 20 years was a sensible compromise. He and the right hon. Member for Anniesland voted for it, but the majority of Labour Members abstained.

Mr. Robathan: Does not my hon. Friend find it strange that Labour Members, who are extremely principled, were persuaded into the Lobby by the weak argument that the hon. Member for Newcastle–under–Lyme (Mrs. Golding) advanced?

Mr. Greenway: My hon. Friend makes a telling point.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: I am enjoying this, but I gladly give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is correct that, at a time when I had a job that I do not even remember—

Mr. Evans: It was the same one!

Mr. Hughes: No, it was a different job. The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) is right that my right hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) argued for no limit in 1989. Liberal Democrat Members agree with the hon. Gentleman that, whatever our view—and there are good arguments for different views—the House should not be bounced into making a decision. We should consider the matter properly before we legislate.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

I now want to move on to other matters because we have given all that a good airing.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire) *rose—*

Mr. Greenway: I shall gladly give way to the hon. Gentleman, with whom I shared a happy week in Ghana in August.

Mr. Barnes: Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that some opposition was expressed in the House when the Bill extending the right to an overseas vote to 20 years was discussed? Six votes took place and two Members—Dave Nellist and myself—voted against anything to do with that extension on each occasion. A number of other Members joined the rebellion and expressed their views. I have consistently adhered to that position and do so now.

Mr. Greenway: That is the most honest intervention I have heard in the House for a long time and the hon. Gentleman has given a good reason why I so enjoyed his company when we were members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation to Ghana.

Before we move on, I want to ask the Home Secretary whether he has given any thought to how many people will be disfranchised if the time limit on overseas votes is cut. Does he agree with the then Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, now Under–Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), who chaired the working party and told the Home Affairs Committee, which the Home Secretary has prayed in aid, that 3 million British citizens live overseas? As I pointed out in response to an intervention, it is significant that the working party, whose report we are asked to implement through the Bill, made no recommendation on that or the franchise in general.

We think that the lesson from all that is clear: the Home Secretary picks and chooses which bits of the Select Committee recommendations he wants to adopt, but Ministers who have to rely on Select Committee recommendations to endorse controversial measures that

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were not proposed by working parties established by their own Department or in a White Paper are skating on thin ice.

Ms Ward: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: No. I have given way to the hon. Lady once.

Although we welcome the Home Secretary's reassurance that he does not intend to introduce the measure on overseas voters in the Bill—that is vital for progress—I hope that what we have said today will influence his judgment on whether he wants to seek the same degree of consensus on the party funding Bill and the implementation of the Neill recommendations, which he knows Conservative Members are willing to endorse and incorporate in full in a Bill. I remember saying precisely that from the Dispatch Box when we debated the Neill report.

We shall look with interest—

Mr. Linton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: I shall give way once more, then I must make some progress.

Mr. Linton: I asked the hon. Gentleman whether he would kindly enlighten the House about the stage at which he and his colleagues changed their view on overseas voters. His colleagues on the Select Committee supported the reduction from 20 years to five. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench colleagues asking them for their views and I asked what they replied and when, but he has not answered. Can he enlighten us? Did his colleagues come out against that reduction only when it suddenly dawned on them that it might cut off their access to funds from Mr. Michael Ashcroft?

Mr. Greenway: The hon. Gentleman is flogging a dead horse, but let me deal with his point and that made by the Home Secretary. In the spirit of unanimity, three Conservative Members agreed to a detailed report and accepted the five-year recommendation, but that in no way binds the remainder of the Conservative party. Those events tell us that when Conservative Members attend Select Committee meetings to consider reports they are free to make up their own minds about what they believe to be the right policy to recommend to the Government. They do not look to their pagers to be told when to put their hands up and to which bits of reports to agree. Our argument is that if the Home Secretary wants to rely on the Home Affairs Committee report, he should implement its recommendations—three of which I have outlined and all of which would strengthen the Bill—in full.

While we are at it, on Tuesday of next week the Home Secretary will hear similar comments from Conservative Members about Select Committee recommendations on the Freedom of Information Bill. I suspect that one or two Labour Members will be in agreement with us on that occasion. In fact, I underestimate how many: I think that there will be quite a few.

We shall examine with interest the proposals for a rolling electoral register, the details of which need careful consideration. We shall support measures to improve facilities for voters with disabilities. As the Home Secretary knows, we have serious concerns about the proposals for the declaration of local connection. That is an important issue. Those concerns were expressed at the time of the working party, and he graciously acknowledged that the Conservative representative on the working party communicated that concern.

To remind the House, the working party said:

"We recognise that this could be thought to open the system to abuse if a candidate or political party sought to use such declarations to falsely register supporters in the electoral areas immediately before an election."

From my reading of the Bill, I do not believe that those concerns have been addressed in the legislation. That makes our point. We are not arguing that there was not a working party and that there were no recommendations. Our argument is that putting those proposals into legislation leaves open the door to abuse.

When the Under-Secretary winds up the debate, will he please tell the House whether the arrangements for a declaration of local connection operate anywhere else in the world? He might like to tell us that now, because I am not aware of any other example. What estimate have the Government made of the number of persons who are eligible to make declarations of local connection? Does the Home Secretary intend that individuals should not be permitted to have more than one declaration of local connection at any one time? If that is the intention, we could easily produce an amendment that would provide for the Bill to say that.

We are surprised—I say this with a heavy heart—that the Government think that a sufficiently large number of people will be living indefinitely on our streets to justify the measure. We are not opposed to a mechanism enabling displaced and homeless people to vote, but that must not be used for electoral fraud or for people to pick and choose where they vote, such as in marginal constituencies and at by-elections. We believe that the Bill needs significant strengthening in that respect, and we shall table constructive amendments to achieve that.

We are also concerned about the Government's proposals on the commercial use of the electoral register. The opt-out box, although well-intentioned in principle, is fatally flawed in practice. Does the Home Secretary agree that the denial of access to the full register by credit referencing agencies would increase social exclusion from financial services? That has been the subject not only of a report commissioned by the Treasury from the Director General of Fair Trading, but of comment from the Economic Secretary. The all-party insurance and financial services group, which I chair—some members of that group are present—has expressed grave concern about low-income households and young people not being able to get a bank account or access to competitive lending and credit facilities.

Does not the CBI strongly oppose the proposals? Submissions to the working party argued that any limiting of access to the register would lead to job losses, increased costs, reduced competition and reduced access to financial services by voters. We believe that the Government should think again about the provision, but if they insist on an opt-out box, we will address those concerns by tabling amendments that would provide a workable solution.

On the question of security for people in public life, it is fair to say that the dreadful murder of Jill Dando is a lesson to all of us that if people can find out where those whom they wish to stalk live, the consequences can be tragic. We are willing to work with the Government to find a solution enabling those who feel that they are potentially exposed to such violence, or to stalking and the like, not to be on the electoral register, because we consider that important.

As for the proposals for pilot schemes, we have no objection to experiments involving innovative forms of voting, including, in principle, early voting. We are, however, concerned by the Government's failure to propose safeguards against the exit polling of early voters, which itself could influence voting on polling day. The Home Secretary should address himself to that. If people are allowed to vote on the Monday and the Tuesday when the majority are voting on the Thursday, and they are polled as they leave, there is a danger that the result could be influenced.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Greenway: I will, just once more.

Mr. Brady: As the Home Secretary has specifically mentioned the possibility of voting on Saturdays and Sundays, he should clearly address himself to what my hon. Friend has said.

Mr. Greenway: That is true. We think that it is one of the factors that should have been clarified much more fully during consultation.

We are also concerned about the absence of a specified limit to the number of days on which early voting can take place. That would add to the problem.

All those points were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) during the passage of the Bill that became the Greater London Authority Act 1999, but so far the Government have chosen to ignore them. We will press them again in Committee.

The remaining question for the House to consider is what form the Committee should take. On 20 November 1995, when his party was in opposition, the Home Secretary told the House that "careful scrutiny" was

"one of the best guarantors of good legislation".—[*Official Report*, 20 November 1995; Vol. 267, c. 339.]

We agree with that. As we speak, however, the Government remain to be convinced that the Bill should be considered by a Committee of the whole House. We believe that it should: precedent dictates that constitutional Bills of this nature should be taken on the Floor of the House, so that Members have an opportunity to contribute. The Representation of the People Bills that became the 1985 and 1989 Acts were so considered; why should the Government seek to deny the same opportunity now, unless they wish to deny effective scrutiny of this Bill?

The Opposition's reasoned amendment gives members of all parties a chance to ask the Government to reconsider all these matters. A Representation of the People Bill reforming electoral procedures should be uncontroversial, and supported with unanimity and consensus throughout the House; the Government, however, are attempting to push the measure through Parliament with unseemly haste, with inadequate scrutiny, and with no attempt to organise serious public consultation. That is the mark of a Government who see clinging to power as their overriding priority. We have grown used to the Government's treating the House and the country with contempt, but in the case of this most important issue we should tell them to think again. I commend the amendment.

5.28 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): It is a novel concept that a Government with a 30 per cent. lead in the opinion polls should be clinging to power, but the speech of the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) contained a number of novel concepts. One was the interesting notion that consensus consists of the Government's accepting all the views of the Opposition but none of the views of their own Back Benchers. I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is far too sensible to accept such a definition of consensus from a party which, after all, will show its respect for consensus by voting against the Bill at 10 pm.

I am entirely satisfied that my right hon. Friend is taking measures—swift measures—to make it easier for people to vote and to give them greater opportunities to vote. I certainly agree with one observation made by the hon. Member for Ryedale: the ability to vote in elections is indeed the most precious attribute that any citizen of a democracy can have. The difficulty that we still have is that it is not a right to vote. It is not easy to vote. Obstacles are thrown up in front of people who wish to exercise the right to elect a Member of Parliament or a councillor. If the Bill can make it easier to vote and increase the turnout at elections, it will have been worth while.

My misgivings about the Bill are not about what it proposes, but what it does not; I hope that by the time it has reached the statute book, it will propose those things. Everything in the Bill relating to enhancing the opportunities for the franchise has my support, but let us consider, for example, the references to postal votes and absent votes for sickness and to late applications. In this electronic age, I can see no reason whatever why there cannot be applications for such votes right through to the eve of poll.

A constituent of mine discovered that he was ill only two or three days before the last general election. He was heartbroken that he was not able to vote. I hope that the use of electronic means for voting will encourage the Home Secretary to place the deadline for applying for absent voting much nearer polling day. I go further—I hope that, in considering means of advancing votes and making it easier to vote, he will look at different ways of absent voting.

Last night, I was discussing with the people who organise telephone voting for the Labour party's national executive committee the way in which that can be used as an alternative to postal voting. In NEC votes, people can vote either by post or telephone. There are secure ways of ensuring that there is no fraud on the telephone. It will make it much easier for people who have applied for a postal vote if they can vote by telephone. They could even do that on polling day itself.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): I ask the right hon. Gentleman a practical question. If a vote were cast by telephone, would not that negate the privacy of the ballot box because someone at the end of the telephone would know how the vote was cast?

Mr. Kaufman: No. I assure the hon. Lady that the way in which the vote is cast in NEC votes can preserve privacy. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) would prefer voting for the London mayoralty candidate to be by telephone because it might preserve privacy, of which he is a new-found adherent.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as we can ascertain who the pensioners on the electoral register are, one way to enfranchise them—for example, if they are ill just before the election—is to send them all a postal vote, which they can either send in, or relinquish at the ballot box?

Mr. Kaufman: There are safeguards against duplicate voting. Indeed, they are referred to in the explanatory notes to the Bill. It may be that what my hon. Friend proposes can be followed through. In examining voting, we need to find out how to make it easier. I am encouraged by the way in which the Home Secretary has suggested that the school, the public building or the library, which are the repositories of polling stations, are not necessarily the only places. Places such as supermarkets, citizens advice bureaux, clinics and many others can be available.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Kaufman: I should like to pursue my argument a moment or two longer. Such places can be available because electronic means of voting are possible. I have referred to voting by phone. My right hon. Friend wishes to make provision for applications for postal votes by fax. That is well and good. I very much hope that he will consider the possibility of voting by fax or e-mail. I could go further.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Telepathy.

Mr. Kaufman: My hon. Friend is one of the few people in the House who, I accept, can cap any attempted witticism of mine.

In this computer age, there is no reason why it should not be possible for those who are on holiday to go into a polling location wherever they are and register their vote by computer rather than having to apply for a postal vote beforehand.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Kaufman: I now have two people to give way to, but knowing my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's attitude of self-abasement to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), I shall give way to her first.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Where does this tremendous faith in computers come from? As the new House of Commons system is busy eating my e-mails as of this week, I do not have the same faith in electronic equipment.

Mr. Kaufman: There can be few locations in this country with as much disruptive building work going on as the House of Commons. Other places are likely to be a good deal safer. There is no reason why someone on holiday in Cornwall could not go to a polling station there and be logged through to a polling centre in their own constituency to vote. The point about democracy is giving people the chance. I agree that the security of the ballot must be maintained and hacking must be prevented. Problems have been noted in the United States in that respect.

It is right that my right hon. Friend should consider pilot schemes, but I hope that when we get to the next election, whenever that may be—sooner or later, it makes no difference to the Opposition—we shall have brought pilot schemes into national use. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Ms Ward) in hoping that my right hon. Friend will not limit himself to local authority pilot schemes, but will institute such schemes himself so that we can have the widest possible participation in elections by the time of the next general election.

Mr. Bercow: I offer an heretical thought. Should not an able-bodied person be expected sufficiently to value our democracy as to be prepared to take the modest trek to the polling station to cast their vote in person?

Mr. Kaufman: That is highly desirable. A great many people set great store by going to the polling station, which is one reason why I applaud my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's provisions on access for people with disabilities. I have constituents with disabilities who do not want to vote by post. They regard it as their right and privilege to be able to go to a polling station and put their cross next to my name—which is an almost universal desire in my constituency. I hope that my right hon. Friend will not make one of his references to my modesty. I am ready to talk about my modesty myself without any support from my right hon. Friend.

Ms Ward: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the increased use by the public of telephone banking systems means that they are used to gaining information, inputting personal identification numbers and dealing with computerised telephones? Therefore, it would be easy to open up our electoral system through this form of voting—among others, as my right hon. Friend has mentioned.

Mr. Kaufman: My hon. Friend is, as always, accurate.

I must tell the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) that it is certainly desirable and part of the social aspect of this country that people should make their way to a polling station. However, sometimes they do not have the opportunity. A mum with three kids who is waiting for her husband to come home from a late shift can miss her vote. Someone working on shift duty can miss her or his vote. There are many reasons why people are unable to vote when they want to. I am simply saying that it does not matter how one votes so long as one votes. That is the participation in democracy that I seek.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): Does the right hon. Gentleman share my view that electronic means can enhance the security of the voting procedures, as the current procedure of walking into a polling station and

simply saying who one is and where one lives is insecure, and is protected only by the fact that people do not seem to want to cheat? Is he encouraged by the fact that we have a system with more than 20,000 access points which manages to register preferences in a lottery within half an hour of the closing point twice a week, and that that seems to work with almost universal reliability?

Mr. Kaufman: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. Although this is a remarkably incorrupt society, we have no knowledge of the amount of personation that goes on at elections. I remember early in my candidature in Manchester, a constituent of mine—from which group of electors I will not say—stopped my car and said, "Mr. Kaufman, we have 21 names on the register in our house. They have all gone home. Can 21 others vote for them?" With deep regret, I had to say no. That does not mean that such things do not happen.

Mr. Evans: May I bring the right hon. Gentleman back from cyberspace to earth for a moment? There are certain aspects of absent voting where we could use technology with which everyone is confident to make progress. I was disappointed to see that the number of days necessary for the issuing of absent ballot papers is to remain the same, although there will be greater flexibility in terms of when they can be given. Surely there could be consensus on reducing the number of days to five working days, or perhaps four. The Royal Mail is very good, so why should we stick to eleven working days?

Mr. Kaufman: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I ask him not to deride cyberspace. Some 10 million people are surfing the internet now, and there will be more by the time of the election. We should not be carried away by the idea, but there are many ways in which we can increase the level of polling, and I hope we will. There is one area in which I do not wish to increase the level of polling, and where I wish to reduce it. Indeed, there is one area in which I wish to eliminate polling.

Before I explain that, I wish to refer to a matter raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle–under–Lyme (Mrs. Golding) about an election a few days ago in a north Staffordshire parish council. Despite the fact that some votes were lost, the matter has to go to the High Court for resolution. I put it to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that while it may be right to apply to the High Court for a new election in the case of a contested parliamentary election, some less burdensome way should be found of resolving a dispute over a parish council election. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister, when he winds up the debate, will refer to that issue.

I deal finally with the question of the overseas vote. I had the dubious privilege of having to negotiate with Leon Brittan over that matter. Anyone who has ever negotiated with Leon Brittan over anything will know that it is something that one wishes to draw to an end as quickly as possible. On that occasion, I was involved in hectic negotiation with him on the question of earlier representation of the people legislation, during which he advanced many preposterous proposals, including ending polling in general elections at 9 pm. I had to reach a compromise with him in order to stop some of his wilder feats of imagination.

Leon Brittan wanted a seven-year rule to apply to the overseas vote, which was an innovation at that time. I was totally opposed to any overseas vote of any kind, because I believe in the simple dictum of no representation without taxation. I was opposed to it entirely but, as part of the compromise over the Bill, I accepted a reduction to five years. I did not like that and I made it clear that I wanted it reversed as quickly as possible. I simply do not know what was going on in the head of my noble Friend Lord Hattersley when he agreed to 20 years as a compromise.

It is clear from the statistics that there is no great enthusiasm for that form of voting. At present, some 13,677 people are on the register of overseas voters, compared with 34,454 in 1991. It is not a privilege whose mass aspiration would be trampled down if my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary decided to get rid of it. On the other hand, small as the number is who take it up, the effect on the potential Government can be significant. My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) was defeated in the 1992 election by 19 votes, with the number of overseas votes being considerably larger than the majority against him. If the election had been tight nationally, the composition of the Government could have been affected by the votes of people who had no stake in it.

Small as the number of people with the overseas vote is, it contains a distinct bias in its distribution around the country. Although the representation of the Conservative party in the House is one quarter, one half of the constituencies with 50 or more overseas votes have Conservative Members of Parliament. In so far as the overseas vote benefits anyone, it benefits the Conservative party.

When the Conservatives introduced the overseas vote, to their credit all they were hoping for was a straightforward political fiddle. Now, however, they are using it for a further political fiddle to justify considerable donations to their party from people who have no stake in this country. The overseas vote is undemocratic and unrepresentative and it should be abolished. We now have a situation in which the sole justification for political donations from people such as Michael Ashcroft, who wants to represent some other country at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting and who is an ambassador of that country—but who nevertheless is the treasurer of the Conservative party and without whom it would fall into financial as well as intellectual bankruptcy—is his presence on an overseas voters register. Although that was not my original reason for opposing that fancy franchise, it is a conclusive reason for getting rid of it.

If the Conservatives do not vote against the Government tonight, their claims to want a consensus can be taken as having some veracity. The moment Conservative Members walk through the Division Lobby to vote against the Bill, even on a reasoned amendment, they are breaking any kind of consensus. That being so, my right hon. Friend should take the road of clean, pure democracy, which I know appeals to his heart and has done in the very many years that I have known and loved him, and accept what his hon. Friends want. I therefore support the Bill as it stands, but hope that I will be able to give it even more support on Third Reading.

5.50 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The argument advanced by the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) for restricting the vote of absentee voters still does not rid my

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

mind of the idea that electronic voting will enable him to phone in his vote from Ibiza at the next local government elections, when he happens to be away on a Select Committee visit. The picture of the right hon. Gentleman on the beach, participating in democracy, can be imagined by us all.

Let me say to the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) that I am not sure that the best argument for the Bill is that we should seek uncontroversial and agreed legislation. Legislation on the representation of the people has not, in the history of Parliament, been uncontroversial. Some of the best has also been the most controversial. I did not learn until a couple of years ago that the Reform Act 1832 was passed by a majority of only one. Seeking consensus is wonderful, and my party tries to do so more often than some, but we must get the legislation right.

The key question that the Government are rightly asking is how British people are best represented. How can they vote most easily, how can they participate most fully, and—the Government's unasked question—how can their wishes be reflected most accurately? Although my hon. Friends and I have deliberately not tabled a reasoned amendment on the third issue, hon. Members will not be surprised if I spend a moment on the element of representation that is noticeably absent from the Bill.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), who was here earlier but is now in his constituency. He has done a great deal of work on these issues, and the hon. Member for Ryedale said that he had made a case for the right to vote to be linked to citizenship, not length of absenteeism. I am glad that the Bill will set up an electoral commission. An independent body should consider these matters regularly and make proposals in a non-partisan way. I hope that the commission will have the power to make recommendations not only on elections but on referendums too. Sooner rather than later, we need a structure for holding referendums as well as elections. Whatever our views about the single currency or electoral reform, it will be far better to get the rules about referendums established independently rather than tying them to the subject of the referendum. The rules should apply to all referendums, whatever the subject; separating the subject from the structure will be to everyone's advantage.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman may know that I take a particular interest in the matter, having introduced the Referendums Bill in the last Session. The Government's new referendums Bill, or whatever it will be called, provides for an allowance of £5 million to be spent in a particular campaign. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is rather bizarre, and may be linked to a particular campaign?

Mr. Hughes: I agree that it is rather bizarre, and the hon. Gentleman knows that in general I support some of his initiatives. I hope that when we come to that debate, we will try to reach a settlement about holding referendums that is in the interests of people, not parties, and in the interests of the best system, not a particular result.

I welcome the working party on electoral processes, which was chaired by the then Home Office Minister, now the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth). I thank him for his work and pay tribute to the work of my colleagues, Chris Rennard—now Lord Rennard—who gave evidence to the Select Committee on behalf of our party, and David Loxton, who was our member of the working party and participated in trying to achieve the best consensus.

We welcome the rolling register proposal. I repeat my tribute to the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who rightly pressed us on the matter. I hope that there will be a greater effort to introduce an annual reminder for people to get on to the list. A summons once a year to go somewhere, fill in a form and register to vote would be far better. In my constituency, the forms normally get delivered in August, for a date of registration in October, to make sure that they are in on time. But a huge spread of time focuses the mind less, not more. People are less likely to vote without an incentive to register or a reminder to do so.

Secondly, we welcome the proposals for increased residential qualification. Mental patients who have not been convicted should of course have the right to vote; it has been a scandal that so far they have not. Remand prisoners who have not been convicted should of course have the right to vote; it has been a scandal that so far they have not. People who are homeless should of course have the right to vote, and it has been a scandal that so far they too have not. It is also right that service personnel should be able to name their place of residence.

I was once canvassing in a by-election and found three names on the register. The person who answered the door was not on the register. I said, "Excuse me, sir, why aren't you on the register?" He said, "Well, I'm a service voter." I said, "May I ask which service?" He said, "It's not far from Portsmouth. You will probably guess that I mean the Navy." So I said, "I'm sorry to be inquisitive, but what job do you do?" After a pause, he said, "Well, I run the Navy." People in the services—whether in the most humble or the most senior post—may want their vote where they live, and they should be allowed that right.

There are several arguments for revisiting the proposal in clause 9. Many people are clearly perturbed about it—indeed, I have received more representations on this proposal than on any other. Secondly—and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) knows more about this than I do—it is a fallacy to suppose that the proposal is the best way of trying to protect people from direct mail. There are other ways of doing that. If we do not want to receive unwanted post, the remedy should be applied generally, not particularly to the electoral register.

Thirdly, there is the serious issue of how such a proposal will affect people for whom the electoral register is used to determine creditworthiness. In constituencies such as mine, many people are out of work. Their appearance on the register confirms that they have an established residence; it gives them the right to receive services that they would not otherwise receive. We must ensure that accepting new proposals will not advance social exclusion rather than social inclusion.

Mr. Allan: The concern is that people will ask to be excluded because they think that they will no longer receive junk mail, but they will subsequently encounter problems regarding creditworthiness, as my hon. Friend mentioned. The question is how to balance the two important data protection principles: not using data collected for one purpose for something else, and ensuring that such data are accurate. Bodies will be able to find data in another way but it will not have the state authorisation of the electoral register, which is believed to be trustworthy, especially when it comes to credit scoring.

Mr. Hughes: I hope that we heed that sort of argument and take a proper, rational, considered view. It is not just the Confederation of British Industry that has made representations. I have had letters from the Stroke Association and Marie Curie Cancer Care. Cancer organisations, I gather, stand to lose about £2 million if we change the rules and make them pay the full commercial price. So I say to the Minister, not in a strident way, that I hope that we can try to reach consensus on this matter.

Mr. Bercow: All the points that the hon. Gentleman has raised are cogent, but does he agree that the threat in clause 9 to impose an additional cost on business should be averted, if at all possible?

Mr. Hughes: I do agree, and think that the matter would be suitable for consideration of the type undertaken in a Special Standing Committee. However, I hope that the Minister will be sympathetic to the idea that we try—behind the scenes and in the Committee Corridor—to work together to get the matter right.

I wish to raise two other points in this section of my speech. Of course it is right that people in general public life, or private people who are threatened—by domestic violence, for instance—should be able to vote without being made more vulnerable. Such people are usually female, but occasionally men come into that category. I shall not elaborate, but the House will be aware that I have some knowledge of these matters.

I do not believe, however, that such privacy should be available to people who are candidates or elected public representatives. I consider that the electorate should know where their councillors and Members of Parliament live, and that those people's addresses should appear on the register and ballot paper. Where electoral candidates live in the community—or whether they live there—is an important and relevant piece of information for electors. The hon. Member for Ryedale rightly cited the case of Jill Dando, but matters are different for people such as Members of Parliament.

I turn now to the issues surrounding the conduct of elections. We support the pilot scheme idea of looking at different ways of extending opportunities for elections. We want to make sure that the pilot schemes are evaluated, and I underline the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie). My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace), the leader of our party in Scotland, is sitting beside her just now. Many of us want to make sure that voting at a time that is against the wishes of the community could take place only if the community agreed to it.

I remind the Minister that, in Wales, there used to be local voting—a referendum—on Sunday opening every 10 years. I have not consulted in detail on the matter with my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute, but the way forward might be to combine district or local authority area votes in the area for a referendum. By that means people could decide when they wanted to vote. I hope that my hon. Friend's point will be heeded.

As for absent voting, the right hon. Member for Gorton made the self-evident point that people must be allowed to vote wherever they are, as modern technology allows them to plug into the electoral system from all over the world. In addition, people living in the United Kingdom should be able to vote by post on a permanent basis. The evidence that I have seen shows that electoral turnouts are considerably higher in countries where people vote only by post than in those where people vote mainly in person. We must reflect on that, even though it may cause the electoral process and campaigning to change, as votes may be cast two weeks before the final date.

A whole set of considerations affect people living abroad, and they have been mentioned already. Clearly, the considerations affecting UK citizens will be different from those affecting people who can vote here because they are Irish, Commonwealth or European Union citizens. It is important to realise that these distinctions exist. Another issue is the need to decide whether the link should be defined according to citizenship, or citizenship and tax liability—a perfectly proper combination—or something else.

I now think that 20 years is probably too long, although I voted against limiting the period to that length of time when it was proposed some 10 years ago. I also think that five years is too short a period. For example, my brother lived in Cyprus, having been sent there by his employer. The posting was not permanent, and although he was there for more than five years he retained strong links with this country and has come back here to live. My point is that we must be careful about people who live abroad only because they are obliged to. We must not act in haste and repent at leisure. That is what the worst legislation leads to, and it still happens far too often.

I understand the temptation to react to the Michael Ashcroft affair and to conflate party funding issues with the provenance of votes. I hope that Ministers resist that temptation. There are legitimate questions about who funds political parties, and it will be quite proper to have that debate. However, like the Home Secretary, I hope that we discuss that matter in a measured and considered way and come to an agreed view about how parties should be funded and about how much people should be allowed to spend in that regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hallam made the point that our methods of checking whether the person who presents the polling card is really the person on the electoral register leave much to be desired. No one knows how much fraud is committed. The injunction "vote early, vote often" is probably followed sometimes—although no hon. Member in this House would know anything about that, of course.

[Mr. Hughes]

People are thoroughly confused about the use of polling cards. Many do not vote because they think that they need a polling card. Disabusing people of that misapprehension would help, as the delivery of polling cards is often even less efficient than the organisation of the register.

Mr. Kaufman: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that replacing the polling card with a personalised swipe card would render fraud much more difficult to commit and would permit votes to be cast from any part of the country, or from abroad?

Mr. Hughes: I support working towards a system that allows people to vote electronically. As has been noted, people increasingly make use of personalised, 24-hour banking services, have their own personal identification numbers for telephone use and employ swipe cards in other contexts. We must be positive about the appurtenances of the modern age, but we must not devise a system that is easy for the clued-up 21-year-old but difficult for the 91-year-old. Some people late in life are not going to take up the use of swipe cards and complicated PIN numbers on their telephones.

I turn now to people with disabilities. I welcome the proposed changes to allow people to have help when they vote. However, I hope that the Government will consider going further, by regulation if not by legislation. There is merit in offering, to all who are registered disabled or who are in sheltered and residential accommodation, help that is independent of the people among whom they live.

It is always a worry that a residential home may deliver a block vote because its frail, elderly and confused residents have been organised by someone in the home. Ensuring that such residents were independent would allow us all to relax and trust the system more.

In very many polling stations, the ballot box is still kept about half a mile from the street entrance. That is often the case when schools are used. People with disabilities are often deterred from voting because the journey through the building is longer than the journey to the building. That is clearly a nonsense.

The Home Secretary spoke of the challenge that we face of revitalising democracy. I do not think that there is a crisis in democracy. Electoral turnouts were often very low in the past, but things can only get better. Sometimes turnouts are abysmal, as happened at last Thursday's election in Kensington and Chelsea. Another dire turnout was recorded in the earlier election at Leeds, Central which, given its many and historic problems, has at least as great a need for proper representation as any area in the country.

Any Representation of the People Bill must pass certain tests. We should seek to produce maximum turnouts at elections, but Liberal Democrat Members are not persuaded that compulsory voting is the answer and consider that other avenues should be explored before we even think of introducing compulsion. Making people vote in a free society appears to be a contradiction in terms.

We must also accept that the result of an election has to reflect the views of the electorate as expressed through their votes. All parties can benefit from the distorted way in which results are determined at present. For example, in the 1998 Newham council elections, Labour won 57 per cent. of the vote and secured all 60 of the available seats. Again, in the 1995 vote in Cheltenham, the Liberal Democrats won 49 per cent. of the vote and secured 93 per cent. of the seats. Hon. Members will know that, in the House and in local councils, one party will often get a majority of votes but another will get a majority of seats.

We will not persuade people that voting matters unless outcomes reflect what they want when they go to the ballot box. We made a bad mistake in June this year. By not linking the voter with an individual candidate in the European elections, we took away the incentive for many people to vote. Those of us who argue for a different and proportional voting system want a system that links to individuals, not merely to a party list.

Whatever we may think of the genesis of the Jenkins report, it makes the best proposal, which is linking constituencies and fairness. I hope that the House remembers that, whatever we think about it, the Government are committed to putting that question to the country. There must be a decision by the country—not by us—as to whether to keep the present first-past-the-post system or to implement the Jenkins report. That was the Government's pledge. It was in the manifesto and it should be honoured.

The reality is that people will vote most if they think that they have a chance of influencing something most. If Parliament is more powerful, people will vote more often in parliamentary elections. If local government has its chains taken away, people will vote more often in local elections. If those institutions are restricted,

"cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd, bound in",

people will ask, "Why bother? It won't change anything." That is why in so many parts of Britain the voting culture reflects that of the one-party state. We have all heard people say, "It doesn't matter whom you put up. Nothing will change." That culture has to be changed and the one-party state mentality has to go.

Young people are the test. They often say that they will not go on the register or vote. We must support all who have been working with the British Youth Council, Operation Black Vote and others to encourage young people to think that they are the people in whose interest it most is to vote. The more they vote, the more this place will reflect their interests and aspirations. Civic education, mock Parliaments and Hansard Society initiatives must all take place too.

This Bill is a beginning. It will do some of the technical things and it is welcome, but it is not the end of the story. Building up communities and making voting easier are important, but—to vary a phrase used this weekend—we need not just reform, but the whole reform and nothing but the reform. If we are to have electoral change, we need, in the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), not only the Monty but the full Monty and nothing but the full Monty. That means reforming the system of voting as well as the procedure. The sooner it happens, the sooner people will vote.

6.12 pm

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): I speak with some trepidation, on a number of grounds. First, many right hon. and hon. Members have shared with the House their experience of the high office that they held when this matter was last debated. At that time, I was the second

substitute on the London borough of Ealing nuclear disarmament working party, which was sadly not conspicuously successful, but would certainly have been taken into consideration were the Ilyushins ever to have approached us.

I am also loth to criticise any aspect of what is an excellent Bill. For example, this is not a case of opening the Christmas present to discover with a cold feeling of horror that one has been given a Jeffrey Archer novel. It is rather that, within the vast body of the Bill—the detail is excellent—there is one small area that gives me ground for concern. I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Labour Front Bench will allow me to deal with clause 9 and the access to credit for people in my constituency, who have a great deal in common with the constituents of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

I am concerned that commercial and charitable organisations will not be allowed access to the electoral roll for credit purposes. As has been said, that could easily be costly and counter-productive. Certainly, there are problems, but it is not beyond the will of this House or the Standing Committee for those to be dealt with, and resolved, without causing severe difficulties for many of our constituents.

The role of businesses and charitable organisations has been mentioned. The credit industry is a particular concern. There is only one national database of this type. The electoral register is, as we all know, utterly unique, as has been recognised by the Office of Fair Trading. I will pray in aid some esoteric sources later to confirm the validity of that statement. The point about the register's uniqueness is that there is no substitute. It is not a question of this mechanism or another. It is all well and good to say that credit checking companies could discover alternative mechanisms. We do not yet have a national identity card or any comparable national database.

When the working party considered the matter—it has been said that a possible weakness of the working party is the lack of representation on it of the commercial or charitable sectors, although they certainly submitted views in writing—it stated that there was anecdotal evidence that people were concerned about receiving junk mail. Far be it for me as a member of the London Labour party to comment on unsolicited mail at the present time, but is the problem really the fact that we might get a few of those appalling letter from the *Reader's Digest* stating that, if we buy dozens of copies of some book, we may be entered in some spurious grand draw that at some stage may solve all our problems? Is that such an awful difficulty? Is it so terrible that the honest postal worker delivers that junk mail and the householder looks at it and throws it away—or, in the case of the correspondence to which I referred, reads it, appreciates it and takes the action suggested?

Ms Ward: Does my hon. Friend accept that, while junk mail is frustrating for those of us who receive it, a more important issue is the security of individuals who are, for example, escaping domestic violence and who want the right to vote and register, but who do not believe that that information should be put in the hands of the public at large and of commercial companies in general, as their pursuers might be able to trace them through it?

Mr. Pound: I thank my hon. Friend for another cogent and telling intervention. I entirely agree—obviously, I would not dare to disagree. I was not suggesting that we should go for what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey described as the full electoral Monty by forcing everyone to reveal themselves on the register. At present, electoral registers contain classifications of people—not merely those who are not entitled to vote in a local government election or who are entitled only to vote in a European election. Additional electors are listed at the end of each category. They appear now. Their names appear on the register, but their addresses do not. Every electoral register in the country has such names. It is not a problem. In many ways, by concentrating on those issues, we could produce a far better clause 9, although my natural obsequiousness prevents me from saying that as overtly as I would do otherwise.

Earlier this year, an NOP survey, which was almost certainly funded by the credit companies, asked whether people would tick the proposed opt-out box when registering to vote and 64 per cent. said that they would. However, when the follow-up question was asked about their credit status, the figures changed dramatically. The problem is that people will tick the box without realising how it will affect their credit status.

Mr. Allan: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the junk mail issue is a distraction and a red herring when we are discussing the electoral register? Junk mail is dealt with by the mailing preference service, whereby people say that they do not want such mail and if anyone mails them, they can be prosecuted. Junk mailing services can find names from 100 different sources.

Mr. Pound: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. We should consider the mailing preference service; that is certainly a possibility. However, my concern—like that of several other Members—is about access to credit for those who could not otherwise achieve it. Banks and other financial bodies tend to be cautious lenders. If people's credit standing is reduced by their opting out of the version of the register that is available to credit agencies, those people will be added to the socially excluded.

At present, there is a mechanism for lending money to people on the boundaries—on desolation row—and we all know what it is. We all know about the loan sharks who prey on our constituents—the people who take child benefit books and accompany mothers to the post office on a Monday morning, cash the benefit, give half the money to the mother and keep the rest. We know about their interest rates, which double, triple and quadruple. Yes, there are possible alternatives, such as credit banks and credit unions—by all means, let us have more of them. However, the immediate, practical alternative to the loan shark is a line of legitimate credit, attested to by one's presence on the electoral roll. If people are council tenants, have just moved to a council property or do not have a job, they do not have any other credit guarantee to offer. I wholly acknowledge the understandable and laudable concerns of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Government, but we must revisit that matter.

Of course the problems of money laundering, fraud and other abuses of the electoral register must be dealt with; I hope to outline a way of doing so later in my speech.

[Mr. Pound]

However, I want to draw the attention of the House to the newsletter of the Hampstead and Highgate Conservatives, advertising their autumn bazaar, which, sadly, took place last Saturday. From the perspective of Ealing, we are awed by the Hampstead and Highgate Conservatives, who offer as raffle prizes cars, 25 televisions and videos and a £5,000 ocean cruise—the newsletter does not tell us whether we can nominate a member of the Conservative party to take that cruise. There is a free champagne draw.

In the corner of the document is the headline, "Not a Conservative supporter?"—oddly enough, there is a question mark—under which is the statement:

"We work off the electoral role".

Hon. Members should note that spelling. Doubtless, it is a tribute to the thespian ambience created by my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson)—long may she continue. The newsletter states:

"If you do not want to receive further mailings from your local Conservatives please let us know . . . by E Mail, agent@ham-high.tory."

The Conservatives realise that there are occasions on which one can make a principled decision as to whether to be included on a database. I have deleted my name from the database.

In January 1999, the Office of Fair Trading produced the report of the director general's inquiry into vulnerable consumers and financial services—an important document.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman told us a most amusing story. Will he confirm that he lives in Hampstead and Highgate and not in Ealing?

Mr. Pound: Although it is possible to register overseas, I live in my constituency; my name appears on the electoral roll there—sadly, only once, but not through lack of trying. None of my domestic pets appears on the electoral roll in my constituency—again, not through lack of trying. However, on the principle of inclusion, I occasionally try to add myself to the lists of Conservative associations—just to see what they are up to. Of course, the possibility of a £5,000 sea cruise may also have influenced me slightly.

Paragraph 302 of the OFT report states:

"there are four financial services that stand out as those which most of today's consumers are likely to regard as essential: money transmission, home contents insurance, short-term consumer credit, and long-term savings."

I repeat, "short-term consumer credit" because that is exactly what we are talking about.

In September 1998, the Prime Minister presented to the House "Bringing Britain together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal", Command 4045. Under the heading "Action Team 14: Financial services", the document states:

"people living in poor neighbourhoods often have to depend on very expensive forms of credit, including 'loan sharks'."

Action Team 14—with whom I am not personally acquainted—point out that its goal is

"to develop a strategy to increase access to financial services for people living in poor neighbourhoods."

Sadly, the measure that we are discussing would not help.

Coming to the end of the information that I pray in aid, I draw the attention of the House to a letter from Islington council. Before Conservative Members leap to their feet, I point out that I have never lived in Islington, although I should be quite happy to do so. The council's electoral registration document, sent to all residents and dated November-December 1999—the council wisely allowed two months for delivery—states

"Dear Resident

Final Reminder to Register to Vote—Mayor and Assembly Election."

The letter does not suggest for whom one should vote—sadly. It contains the statement that

"to avoid difficulties with banks, credit companies, building societies, and libraries, who often check the register before providing services, it may be useful to provide this information."

In November-December 1999, a London council is telling its electors that, in order to receive credit, to open a bank or building society account, or even to borrow a library book, they need to be on the electoral register.

Many of us will remember Sheila McKechnie, who used to run Shelter; she is now the director of the Consumers Association. She asked the House

"to focus on the potential increase in social exclusion caused by a restriction on access to this data . . . This proposal could create further barriers to obtaining credit for vulnerable consumers. Namely, those who do not have passports, driving licences or utility bills . . . for whom the present system works well."

I had not given this matter much thought until one of my constituents, Pauline Jones, spoke to me about it. She works for Equifax—one of the two major data-collection companies. Ms Jones told me of her concerns, not just as a loyal member of that company, but as someone who is genuinely worried about the law of unintended consequences. I cannot believe that anyone—save, possibly, a few Conservative Members—could object to the main thrust of the Bill. However, one of the unintended consequences—I am sure that it is unintended—of the restriction of commercial availability of the electoral register is that the sort of people with whom my constituent works and whom I represent will suffer.

There are alternative proposals. The Direct Marketing Association has already suggested an additional form of restriction on availability of the roll. There are other ways of dealing with the matter. Sadly, the current baby-and-the-bath-water system will not serve the inclusive, joined-up governmental aims of the Administration in relation to social exclusion.

I thank the House for its tolerance and indulgence; the subject is one of great importance. When my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department sums up the debate, I hope that he will tell us that it will be possible to reconsider the matter. I thank him and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for being so courteous and so generous with their time as to talk about the matter with me before the debate. I hope that we can discuss it further in Committee and deal with it. The rest of the Bill is Christmas come early; it is wonderful. I have no problem with it.

6.29 pm

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): It is always a pleasure to listen to the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), and I am fascinated to know of his

connections with Conservative associations. I am afraid that the Epping Forest Conservatives' Christmas bazaar is already past, but I should like to check that the hon. Gentleman has received his invitation to the Epping Forest Conservatives' Christmas party. I hope that he will let me know if he has not, as it is obviously an oversight on the part of my computer. I will give way to the hon. Gentleman. *[Interruption.]* I did not hear the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Pound: I am sorry; I merely said that I would be reluctant to attend the soirée at Epping Forest with my wife if the previous Member was present.

Mrs. Laing: I do not know whether that is a compliment. I shall be more careful in giving way in future.

Mr. Bercow: What does the hon. Gentleman's wife think?

Mr. Pound: She is keen to go.

Mrs. Laing: The Bill contains much that is good. Any measure that improves the democratic process is to be welcomed, and should be welcomed by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Some measures in the Bill would make the ballot box more accessible to people who are in some way disadvantaged, which can only be good. As the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said, voting is a very precious right—the most precious right in the defence of a free society—so he is absolutely right to welcome most parts of the Bill.

I wish to draw attention to some aspects of the Bill. First, I am worried about the idea of a declaration of local connection. It is hard to understand how that could work well, and how it could improve the democratic process. Would it mean, for example, that the gypsies—it may be more politically correct to say travellers, because I know that some genuine gypsies do not like to be confused with travellers—who have recently moved into my constituency for an unknown length of time would, in some circumstances, have the chance to be registered and to vote? If they could do so in my constituency at present, could they do so again, in a few weeks, in another constituency? Would they be able to declare a local connection in more than one place at once? If one need not be permanently resident in one place, surely it is theoretically possible to have a local connection with more than one place at a time.

I appreciate that many of us can be registered to vote in more than one place; indeed, many Members of the House are because of our respective residences in our constituency and, during the week, in London. However, we exercise our adherence to the law in voting only once. Not everyone in the country can be trusted to be quite as scrupulous in their adherence to the law. I am very uneasy about that.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend has just conjured up an extremely worrying scenario. Does she agree that if people were free simply to hop, skip, jump or traverse by other means all over the country at short notice and be entitled to vote, we would be faced with the electoral equivalent of flying pickets?

Mrs. Laing: As ever, my hon. Friend eloquently illustrates a difficult point. He is absolutely right; we could indeed have flying local connection voters. We could certainly have itinerant local connection voters, and modern technology makes it possible to move quickly around the country and vote very many times.

Mr. David Taylor (North–West Leicestershire): It is probably true that the largest single group of people who appear on two electoral registers is university students, of whom there are probably 500,000 or more in the United Kingdom. Is the hon. Lady suggesting that, as a group, they are not worthy of trust?

Mrs. Laing: Certainly not. I am very glad that the hon. Gentleman asked that question. I was a student, and I was registered in more than one place, but I do not believe that university students or other students who have a home address and a temporary term-time address, or those who have a temporary work address—such as nurses—fall into that category. As I understand the Bill, they would not be required to declare a local connection. They have a permanent, although not always occupied, position in a student hall of residence or a hospital, for example, so there is no problem. The problem would occur with people who deliberately wanted to vote more than once. That could happen. It is our duty, in passing laws, to make electoral rules as watertight as possible, but I can see gaping holes in the legislation. It is not watertight and its provisions must be more closely addressed.

Secondly, I welcome the rolling register. It is a good idea, and modern technology will allow the register to be updated more than once a year. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) drew attention to the fact that peers who were formerly Members of another place lost their right to a voice in Parliament, and the next day were not given a right to vote. Many of them lived in a constituency where there was an imminent by-election, in which they were not allowed to vote. They were disfranchised. The Minister will say that that was only temporary, but a temporary departure from an important principle is as bad as any other departure from an important principle.

A Labour Member said that, even if those peers had been able to vote, it would not have made a difference to the by-election result. It might have. All those peers might have voted for Miss Whiplash; she might not have lost her deposit. We do not know, and it is not up to us to know, but it is up to us to defend their right to cast their vote. That is what counts.

Thirdly, the introduction of new technology worries me. I share, of course, the Home Secretary's wish to give greater access to the polls to people who are disabled. The very last thing that my mother did before she died, a few weeks ago, was to go out to vote. It was very difficult for her to do so because she could not walk up the front steps of the polling station—a back door of the building had to be opened for her. It took a whole day's organisation to enable her to get into that polling station to cast her vote. She was determined to do so. It would have been much better if she could have retained her right to vote without having to be practically carried to the ballot box.

I am well aware that, in that situation, most people who were not of the character and determination of my late mother would not bother to vote. Therefore, anything that

[Mrs. Laing]

we can do to improve accessibility, especially by developing new technology, must be welcomed. However, let us not go too far. The right hon. Member for Gorton painted a picture of voting systems that entirely depend on pressing electronic buttons. So much can be done by telephone, by e-mail—if one can work out how to get into the e-mail—by computer or by other electronic means. However, as a society, we should be careful about that. If everything is done by electronic means, we shall soon lose all social connection. People will never meet each other. They will not go shopping; they will log on to the internet and click on the Tesco website, although I find that that takes longer than going to the supermarket.

Ms Ward: I fully understand the hon. Lady's point about social connection, but does she not agree that the chances of meeting someone in a voting station and having a decent conversation are very small unless one is a politician looking for votes?

Mrs. Laing: I often agree with the hon. Lady, but I disagree on this occasion. On a sunny morning in my constituency, people like to go out to vote and they meet each other. Groups of people who have not seen each other for ages are able to talk because they have all gone to the same place at the same time on the same day. It is a social function to go to the polling station to vote. I do not suggest that people enjoy voting as a recreation in the same way that they would enjoy going to a coffee morning. However, we must be careful that we do not do everything electronically and lose all social connection.

My fourth point is about compulsory voting, which the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) mentioned briefly. In Australia, voting is compulsory, but the system of proportional representation used there is complex. I visited Australia two years ago and was shown the ballot paper. It was bigger than me or the hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward). It would be hard to deal with such a ballot paper and it would take ages to fill in.

Mrs. Dunwoody: The hon. Lady should not undervalue the advantages of proportional representation. In New Zealand, the system is so complicated that it has guaranteed no real Government for some years.

Mrs. Laing: I am delighted that the hon. Lady has made that point. I was broken hearted at the result of the New Zealand election last weekend. I am afraid that my first reaction was, "Well, there we go again—the wrong result under proportional representation."

Mr. Pound: No, Labour won.

Mrs. Laing: Some Labour Members might consider it to be the right result under PR. Whether one thinks the result in New Zealand was the right one or the wrong one, it is the wrong system.

In Australia, it is not surprising that the Government had to make voting compulsory. As many people in the House know—I think that the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) will agree—the best way to encourage voting is to keep it simple and to make it meaningful. We do not want people to go to the polling station to spend an hour in there reading the ballot paper. It should be simple for people to cast their votes and to know that the way in which they cast their vote will have an effect on the result of the election.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey seemed to agree about the complexity of the system in Australia and about the undesirability of introducing compulsory voting. I hope that he will also come round to the sensible view that changing the voting system in this country will be bad for democracy and will discourage people from voting. We saw that happen in the turnout for the European elections a few months ago.

The central issue in the Bill is how one is qualified to vote for this Parliament and other democratic institutions in our country. The Home Secretary said that he hoped that there would be a consensus on the measures for overseas voters. However, I listened to the right hon. Member for Gorton and I am certain that such a consensus is unlikely. I would find it difficult to agree with the right hon. Gentleman on this point. He was dangerously close to suggesting that we, as Parliament, should adopt a clause that would give electoral advantage to one party or the other. I hope that no Member would ever vote for party advantage rather than for a point of principle. The right hon. Gentleman said that only 13,000 people from overseas voted and that the vast majority of them voted in what are currently Conservative constituencies, but so what? That does not matter.

I am aware that the right hon. Member for Gorton is not present to respond to my points, but I would gladly give way to him if he were. However, it does not matter how those overseas voters vote; we are discussing a matter of principle.

Mr. Greenway: Someone said—I think that it was the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman)—that there should be no representation without taxation. Is it not a fact that many of the 13,000 people who voted pay income tax in this country on their pensions and their investments?

Mrs. Laing: Yes, it certainly is a fact; I agree with my hon. Friend. Those voters also pay national insurance in this country, because they intend one day to return to live here and they want to benefit from their national insurance contributions in later years. They have not severed their connections with the United Kingdom; they are merely absent for some time. Five years' absence is a short time in most people's careers.

Mr. Bercow: As usual, the observations of my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) have prompted a thought in my mind. Would my hon. Friend not agree that the principle applies the other way round as well? Perhaps there should be no taxation without representation. Does she not agree that the people in Kensington and Chelsea who were wrongly and monstrously disfranchised by the administrative incompetence of this Government have reason to feel aggrieved? They paid their taxes, but they did not get their representation.

Mrs. Laing: Once again, my hon. Friend eloquently makes an extremely good point. I am always aware of the

problems of the Exchequer, so I would not venture to suggest that the people to whom he referred should be exempt from taxation. That would leave a large hole in the Exchequer's receipts.

I was discussing qualifications to vote, and there are two inconsistencies in the Bill. The first inconsistency relates to new section 4(1)(c) of the Representation of the People Act 1983 proposed in clause 1, which states that a resident who is

"a Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the Republic of Ireland"

has a right to vote. I do not object to that; it has been the case for some time. However, that provision is inconsistent with schedule 2, which refers to the right of United Kingdom citizens resident abroad to vote in UK elections for 20 years—an issue to which the right hon. Member for Gorton referred.

The Bill will allow people who live in this country, however temporarily and who are not citizens, the right to vote. However, the right hon. Member for Gorton expressed his intention to table an amendment to shorten from 20 to five years the period in which UK residents overseas are allowed to vote and the Home Secretary said that he would turn his mind to that subject later during the Bill's passage through the House. If such an amendment were accepted, there would be ridiculous imbalance. A citizen of the Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland who is resident in this country, however temporarily, would be able to vote, but British citizens, who are temporarily not resident in this country and who may have a far greater stake in the future government of the United Kingdom, would not be able to vote. That would simply be unfair.

The second inconsistency concerns the matter that I mentioned a few moments ago—the possibility of someone who does not have a permanent base in a constituency in this country making a declaration of local connection. Could a British citizen who resides overseas temporarily, but for more than five years, make a declaration of local connection in, for example, my constituency, and have a vote? If the Minister wants to answer that question, I will gladly give way to him.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien) *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Laing: No, he does not.

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Lady knows that I will, in closing, deal with many of the points raised in the debate.

Mrs. Laing: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his assurance that he will do so. I appreciate that I am springing on him a matter that may not previously have been raised. However, it will be inconsistent if people who do not have a permanent home have a right to vote but people who are temporarily away from Britain do not. It is very worrying that another huge loophole in the system will be created by introducing a declaration of local connection.

Mr. Robathan: When my hon. Friend was speaking, she may not have heard the calls of "Belize" from Members on the Benches opposite. Does she think that those who want to change the 20-year rule may have a specific motivation, and that it may be a petty-minded, vindictive motivation against one person, pursued in a rather pathetic partisan and political manner?

Mrs. Laing: My hon. Friend makes an outrageous suggestion. Who could believe that the Government would want to change a point of principle in a Bill of such constitutional importance as one concerned with representation of the people for the sake of one individual? No, my hon. Friend must be wrong because his suggestion is utterly preposterous; nevertheless, I thank him for making it.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I shall take the hon. Lady away from the dangerous shoals of Belize for a moment. Is she really saying that if citizens do not have a fixed abode in this country, they should lose their right of citizenship in this country, and that they should not have a vote if they do not have a household? Are we to return to the householder vote?

Mrs. Laing: Not at all, and if I have given that impression, I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to correct it. I certainly do not believe that. In my constituency there is a hostel for homeless people which often houses a large number of people who are waiting for council accommodation. I would not suggest for one moment that those people should lose their right to vote. I utterly defend their right to vote. The intention to give people who do not have a permanent home the right to vote is correct, but I question whether the mechanism set out in the Bill is the right way to do so.

Mr. Barnes *rose—*

Mrs. Laing: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman, although I appreciate that I have been speaking for some time because I have taken many interventions.

Mr. Barnes: Is the hon. Lady not aware that homeless people in hostels often do not qualify to vote because to do so one must have a residence? That is the problem with the existing law. The declaration of location would allow those people to be put on the register, as well as those who are sleeping on park benches.

Mrs. Laing: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. The matter requires, and will no doubt receive, greater consideration when we examine the Bill in more detail.

I shall give two examples of people who live outside the United Kingdom but have substantial connections with this country. If the period of overseas residence after which absent citizens can no longer vote is changed from 20 years to five years, the people in those two examples will lose their right to vote.

The first example is a gentleman aged over 80, who until recently spent his whole life in this country. He worked for over half a century, paid tax and made great contributions to the community and society in which he lived. He fought during the whole of world war two and was wounded in action, commissioned on the field and awarded the distinguished conduct medal. You will understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the person whom I

[Mrs. Laing]

am describing has devoted his entire life to this country, and he did a lot of good work—including charitable and political work—for well over half a century.

The gentleman now lives in Spain, because of ill health and to be close to his family since the death of his wife. He has lived in Spain for almost five years. I told him yesterday that there is a danger that he might not be able to vote at the next general election and, not surprisingly, he was appalled. He considers, naturally enough, that having devoted his entire life to this country and its good, he should have every right to be involved in the country's future and in decisions about who should be its future Government. One day, he will probably come back to the United Kingdom. Why should he lose his right to a say in the government of this country?

When I pointed out the situation to the gentleman, he said, "I don't understand that. I'm living in the European Union, so my vote at the next election will determine the Government of the United Kingdom. That Government will have considerable determination in the running of the European Union, and that is how I shall be able to influence, in my small way as a voter taking part in the democratic process, the future of the European Union in which I live."

For those two reasons, I ask why that gentleman should lose his vote. That is a very serious matter, and I hope that the Minister will address it in his remarks.

My second example concerns employees of British companies who are posted abroad. They may well still be paying tax and national insurance in this country, but one way or another they will be contributing to the success of companies that are British-based. At the very least, their efforts on behalf of those companies will contribute to the companies' profits and therefore to the tax that the companies pay in this country.

My example is more precise: I have in mind someone who lives in Gibraltar. At best, the Government ignore Gibraltar, and at worst, they victimise it. They seem to wish that it simply did not exist. Gibraltar is British. Its people voted quite recently, and they have shown again and again that they want to remain British. They do not have a vote in European Union elections, even though they are part of the European Union. In that sense, Gibraltarians are already disfranchised.

In the debate on the Bill, however, I want to address the problems not of Gibraltarians but of British people who live in Gibraltar. The particular person whom I have in mind works for a British company and therefore contributes, in the way that I have just described, to the British economy, the welfare of the United Kingdom, the welfare of Gibraltar and the way in which Britain supports Gibraltar.

If the Government want to support Gibraltar, they should be aware that, if the Bill is amended to limit entitlement to an overseas vote to those who have been absent from this country for less than five years, rather than 20 years, it will be yet another insult to Gibraltarians and other people who live in Gibraltar. The Government will have once again disfranchised the very people who support British interests in a place where those interests ought to be supported. I hope that the Minister will take that matter seriously.

When making laws, we in this Chamber should focus not on individual cases or on party advantage, but on principles. I appreciate that the general intention behind the Bill is good—to make it easier for people to vote and so improve the democratic process. I wholeheartedly agree with that intention. However, certain parts of the Bill will not achieve their intended result. I am pleased that, the Bill being an important constitutional measure, its Committee stage is to take place on the Floor of the House, and I look forward to more detailed consideration of its provisions in days to come.

7.1 pm

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I speak as a member of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, both in support of the Committee's report on electoral law, which is listed among the documents relevant to the debate, and in support of the Bill itself. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), now Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on his work. Having seen some of the many reports he commissioned when he was a Home Office Minister, I commend not only his thoroughness but, more important, his timing.

A Bill such as this has to come in the third Session of a Parliament, for that is late enough for the lessons of the last election to have been learned but early enough for changes to be made before the next election. Of course, the purpose behind the Bill must be to make changes that can be applied by the time of the next election. In addition, the third Session of a Parliament is early enough to avoid the pre-election period when hon. Members on both sides are more concerned about party advantage than about taking a constructive, cross-party approach to the shortcomings of our electoral system.

In its report on electoral law and administration, the Committee noted that

"the current electoral arrangements by and large work well".

I must confess that that statement strays into hyperbole, for there are many failings in the operation of our electoral arrangements. The system can be impossibly bureaucratic: there are at least seven different forms with which one can apply for a postal vote. In addition, the system can hardly be described as efficient when there are, as my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) pointed out in his evidence to the Committee, an estimated 4 million people who should be on the register but are not, and about 7 million who, by the end of the electoral year, are on the register where they should not be. I hope my hon. Friend will elaborate on that point if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

That is why I welcome the Bill's three main provisions: the rolling register, continually updated throughout the year; postal voting on demand; and pilots of early voting, electronic voting, out-of-area voting, weekend voting—you name it, there will be a pilot of it. Those are all measures that the Home Affairs Committee asked for and that the Bill delivers. In fact, the Bill delivers some reforms for which the Committee did not ask: giving the vote to remand prisoners—a matter the Committee overlooked; piloting electronic counting and voting, of which the Committee was, not without reason, somewhat wary; piloting postal-only elections, which have worked extremely well in other countries, dramatically affecting turnout; and offering electors an opt-out from the electoral

register sold commercially, which is opposed by the Confederation of British Industry but popular with many voters.

However, there is a far longer list of reforms for which the Committee asked but the Bill does not deliver, and I owe it to the Committee and the House to mention those matters, the first of which relates to dual registration for parliamentary elections. The Committee accepts that people should be able to register in a second seat as a local elector, and peers and European nationals can already do so. However, people should be able to register as parliamentary electors in only one seat. Under a system whereby votes are likely to make more of a difference in some seats than in others, giving people a choice of constituency gives an unfair advantage. Once postal voting is given on demand, those who genuinely split their time between two constituencies, such as students, should have no problem voting, wherever they are when the election happens.

That is the view not only of all three parties represented on the Committee, but of the representatives of all three major parties—Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat—who gave evidence to the Committee. It is also the view of many of the smaller parties. However, it was opposed by the Home Office with the comment that there was "no enthusiasm" for such a change among members of the working party. To be frank, if we acted only when the Home Office was enthusiastic, we would never get anything done.

The second point of difference relates to anonymous registration. The Committee proposed to allow a few people to register anonymously—that is, without their name appearing in any public version of the electoral register—in exceptional circumstances, such as vulnerability to domestic violence. The working party decided that that required further study, but the Committee does not agree: we think it could be granted now. The working party has proposed an opt-out from the commercial version of the register, but that will not satisfy the requirements of, say, a woman who is vulnerable to domestic violence.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that several more enlightened councils have introduced a procedure whereby people can register under a nom de plume, so that no one can discover where an at-risk person lives but that person does not lose his or her vote?

Mr. Linton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. There is currently little latitude for electoral registration officers to exercise such discretion, and it is good that some feel confident that they can do so. However, it is important for the Government clearly to set out in legislation the parameters for all electoral registration officers.

On the question of early voting, the Bill's provisions are rather tentative. A pilot scheme is proposed, but my view of early voting is that it should enable people to vote not only in a different part of their local authority area but in different parts of the country. Early voting is supposed to help those who might suddenly be called away on business or for a family emergency but who still want to vote.

While the Home Affairs Committee report was being written, I was on holiday in Sweden, where an election was going on, and I asked the electoral authorities there how they dealt with early voting. I was amazed to learn that, in Sweden, on producing one's polling card and some other form of identification, one can cast one's vote at any post office anywhere in the country throughout the two weeks preceding polling day and up to 5 pm on polling day itself; the post office then conveys the vote to one's own polling station by 8 pm on the day the polls close. More than one third of Swedish voters exercise their vote in that way, perhaps because they are away from home or because it is simply more convenient than going to the polling station.

I also learned of the Swedish arrangements in the event of an elector changing his or her address. In this country, if a person who has changed address rings up the town hall to ask whether his or her electoral address can be altered, the response is, "I'm sorry, but no. Phone back on 10 October next year and we'll think about it." In Sweden, such a person simply goes into a tax office and types the new address into a keyboard; the following morning, the address is valid as that person's electoral address and for all other public services.

In many ways, we are not beginning to use the advantages that the computer age gives us to change electoral registration. We are still insisting that it should take two weeks as a minimum. Early voting pilot schemes in a single local authority area will not test the real purpose of early voting. However, I hope that they will be rolled out quickly before the next general election so that we can use early voting for what it is really intended, which is to replace much of what is postal or proxy voting.

Thirdly, we have to apply for postal votes 11 working days before polling. The Committee believes that that deadline could be much later. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) suggested that it should be up to the eve of the poll. In Sweden, as I have recounted, it is up to three hours before the close of the poll. It is rather disappointing to read in the working party's report that the advice received from electoral administrators was that there should be no change from 11 days. I think that we can do better than that.

The franking of ballot papers is a ridiculous and outdated requirement. Its only practical effect was to disqualify 2,500 voters at the 1997 election because the official mark had been left off the papers by mistake. However, the working party's response is that franking still "requires reconsideration". I think that we could get rid of franking straight away.

The Bill could afford to be much more decisive on the qualification of candidates.

Mr. Grieve: If the franking of ballot papers is to be dispensed with, how will an identifying mark be provided to prevent the stuffing of ballot boxes if non-electronic methods continue to be used?

Mr. Linton: The Select Committee suggested that there should be a security device, but not one that relies on the memory of the election agent in stamping each ballot paper before it is given to the voter. Security needs to be maintained.

[Mr. Linton]

The Select Committee suggested an increase in candidates' deposits from £500 to £700, which thereafter would be index linked, and an increase in the number of assentors from 10 to 50. The response was that there is a serious case for increasing the deposit. Who could doubt that after the Kensington and Chelsea by-election, in which Lisa Lovebucket received fewer than 100 votes. She was one of about 15 candidates who received fewer votes than the deposit level. The working party's report suggested that increasing the number of assentors would place a significant additional burden on electoral administrators. I do not believe that counting up to 50 assentors places a serious burden on administrators. However, it might be a serious burden on no-hope, joke candidates, who would have to find 50 people prepared to sign their nomination papers.

There are no proposals in the Bill to lift the disqualification of ministers of religion, a subject on which my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) has introduced a ten-minute Bill. One would think that the Bill provided an opportunity to clear up that legal mess.

The same is true of the Select Committee's proposal that candidates should be nominated only under names by which they have been known for some time, and usually the name by which they are registered on the electoral register. Given the experience of all parties in this place, surely that would be a self-evident reform. Another consideration is the name of the party—we have had the literal democrats and the conversatives—although that is taken care of in the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998. However, someone with the name Roy Harold Jenkins stood in Glasgow, Hillhead; and someone renamed himself Sir Nicholas Lyell in an attempt to stand against the Member of that name. That attempt failed only after an expensive court case.

The Select Committee's proposal that 100 per cent. grants should be available to local authorities to make polling booths more accessible to the disabled was turned down on the ground that it might lead to a substantial increase in the level of claims against the Consolidated Fund. This is hardly an issue of resources; it should be a matter of principle that the costs of the changes that need to be made to polling stations to make them accessible to the disabled should be refunded.

The proposal in the report that may have caused most publicity is that the 20-year maximum period within which a British citizen overseas may retain the right to vote is excessive and that the earlier limit of five years should be restored. That was agreed unanimously by the representatives of all parties on the Committee, as was the entire report. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said soon afterwards in his response that he would consider the proposal sympathetically and consult other parties. It may be that the issue is better dealt with next month or whenever the political parties, elections and referendums Bill is published. I do not think that anyone has an interest in rushing the issue. I heard my right hon. Friend's assurance that amendments can be moved to exactly that effect when we consider that Bill. I raise the issue now because the recommendation could be implemented most logically by an amendment to the Bill before us.

It was first provided in the Representation of the People Act 1985 that overseas voters should be allowed to vote in elections for up to five years after they had left the country. In the Representation of the People Act 1989, that was extended to 20 years. The hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) might like to know that before those Acts the rules for registration in parliamentary elections were very similar to the rules of residence applied by the Inland Revenue. There was almost an exact correlation between being a resident taxpayer and having the vote. That is an important principle which is still relevant.

Representation of the People Acts have been something of a disappointment. The overseas vote could have been claimed by up to 3 million people and was expected to be claimed by about 200,000. The highest figure was 34,000 in 1991, and it has now dwindled to 13,000, an average of 21 votes per constituency. I do not know whether my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton is right when he says that overseas voters are biased towards the Conservative party. I know that there are many Labour voters among them who are members of the Labour International branch or the Labour New York branch. However, the concession goes to some people who have only a tenuous connection with Britain. Indeed, they may have the vote under a different nationality in their home countries. The vote goes also to many tax exiles who have deliberately left the country to avoid paying our taxes.

Mr. Brady: On a point of information, I wonder whether the Select Committee took evidence to ascertain what proportion of the 13,000 people overseas who voted had been overseas for more than five years, and what proportion would still be eligible to vote under the five-year limit.

Mr. Linton: That is an interesting point. I am seeking the answer to it. I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire knows the answer. However, I know that the great majority of overseas voters come within the five-year rule; there are very few such voters between five and 20 years. I think that it is wrong in principle for someone who does not pay tax in this country to have a hand in deciding how much tax the rest of us should pay.

Mr. Grieve: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. He seemed to suggest that there was something wrong if someone had the right to vote in two different states at once. I am sure that he is thinking through the implications of that, because there are millions of people in this country in that category, who happen to reside here and also have a vote in, for instance, the Republic of Ireland. Many people have the right to vote here who also have the right to vote in other European states. I ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect on that. It seems to be the weakest part of the argument that he is advancing.

Mr. Linton: If that forms the subject of an amendment to the political parties Bill, there will clearly be an opportunity to debate the matter further. The position of voters from the Republic of Ireland is recognised as anomalous, and springs from the historical relationship between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. The position of European nationals is different. They can vote in the United Kingdom in local elections and in European elections, but not in parliamentary elections. Commonwealth citizens can vote in this country if they are resident in this country, and many of them exercise that right, but they usually lose their right to vote in their country of origin, depending on the laws of that country.

Different countries have different approaches to the matter, and we must decide what our approach should be. I am suggesting that an important principle in our approach should be that those who do not pay tax should not have a hand in deciding the tax that the rest of us pay. That applies particularly to tax exiles, because by moving abroad to escape our taxes, they have forfeited the right to interfere in UK elections and, in my view, to bankroll UK parties.

Mrs. Laing: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is advancing a dangerous principle. There are many hundreds of thousands of people in this country who do not pay tax, for a variety of reasons. Almost every single one of them has, and should have, the right to vote. Was not that the reason for all the fuss about what I call the community charge, and the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends call the poll tax?

Mr. Linton: I thank the hon. Lady for that point, but does she really believe that there are many people in this country who do not pay tax? Will she not reflect on that? Does she not realise that the poorest people in the country pay the highest level of tax proportionate to their income because they pay value added tax on most of what they buy? She forgets the levels of tax paid by poor people in the UK.

However, the point would be just as well made if I had said "eligible to pay tax." That is the test—not the amount of tax that has been paid, but the liability to pay tax. The House is not yet in a position to take a final decision on that, because it raises many difficult issues about the relationship between citizenship, liability to tax and residence, which require reflection. I am happy to have that debate in the context of the political parties, elections and referendums Bill when it comes in the new year. I am happy to concede that if the Government believe that it would be the best way to proceed.

I hope that the Government, in turn, will be helpful and flexible on some of the points that I have raised—fairly small proposals from the Committee, which have not yet found their way into the Representation of the People Bill but could be inserted before the Bill receives Royal Assent.

7.23 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I was impressed by the detailed knowledge of the electoral system displayed by the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), which taught me a little. I was less impressed by the hon. Gentleman's prescience. I note that four years before the 1992 election—on the result of which I won some money—the hon. Gentleman wrote a pamphlet entitled "Labour can still win." Of course, Labour did win in 1997, but I should not like to wait nine years before the hon. Gentleman got everything right.

I take issue with the hon. Gentleman on the same point as did my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing). He said that people who do not pay taxes should not have the right to vote, but that even the poorest people pay VAT. If I have a property in the UK, I pay property taxes, although I may not be resident. Many people who may have been abroad for 20 years still pay income tax on their pensions, and tax on the property and investments that they have in the UK. The hon. Gentleman's argument does not hang together. He may be able to develop it in other ways, but not now.

I do not intend to reiterate all the excellent points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) and for Epping Forest, so I shall not detain the House as long as I might otherwise have done.

The Home Secretary said that he hoped that the so-called reforms would command the trust of the electorate. Having studied the Bill closely, I am more worried that it may debase the entire process of voting. The Bill makes me uneasy. It contains some good points on which the House can agree—points about access for the disabled, and proposals for making postal voting and other methods easier. I am all for that.

My first taste of the electoral system after being a candidate was in 1990 in Hammersmith and Fulham. I tell the story because it brings out the potential for fraud that exists throughout the system. In 1990, some of the counters in Hammersmith and Fulham were wearing T-shirts bearing the words "Stuff the poll tax," which suggests that they gave their political allegiance to one particular department.

That was more noticeable when I saw two bundles of votes being counted. I noticed the two bundles of votes going under two red stickers indicating Labour party votes. Underneath, too, were 48 Conservative votes. I do not suggest that the only people who might defraud the system are Labour party supporters, but that is what happened, and it was critical in two council seats which would otherwise have gone the other way. We should be wary of the possibility of fraud in our present system.

What is the purpose of the Bill? As I understand it, it is designed to increase participation. The problem is that people are not especially interested, as my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest said. How do we interest them? It is a failure of current politics that people are not interested. We should analyse that.

I am sure that hon. Members on both sides tell their constituents, as I do, that it is important to vote. We have all met people on the doorstep who say, "I'm not voting in the election. Don't believe in it." I tell them, as I hope others do, that people around the world are still dying for the vote, many have died in this country in the past, and they should vote. Needless to say, I hope that they vote Conservative. I believe that everybody should exercise his right to vote if he can, and I say that in schools as well. I trust that we would all agree.

I find that in the Bill we have abandoned the KISS principle—keep it simple, stupid. Some of the provisions make the process more complicated. Thirty-two years ago, I did British Constitution A/O-level, and I remember that lunatics, criminals and peers were not entitled to vote. That has now changed.

[Mr. Andrew Robathan]

In reverse order, I shall deal first with peers. After the by-election in Kensington and Chelsea, Viscount Montgomery of Alamein said:

"During the passage of the Lords Reform Bill, assurances were given that departing peers would be re-enfranchised immediately. To add insult to injury, this has not happened. Once again we see an overpowering Government which talks about democracy but does not practise it."

He was on the electoral register, but was turned away from the polling booth because it had not filtered down that he was, indeed, allowed to vote as he had been disfranchised in the House of Peers.

On criminals, I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). It is a bizarre suggestion that people currently residing at Her Majesty's pleasure in a remand centre should be allowed to vote. If someone is locked up because it is considered that he should not be on the streets, he should not be allowed to vote.

We no longer speak about lunatics, but people with impaired mental health should surely not determine who governs the country. An article in *The Times* on Monday 22 November stated:

"The extraordinary proposal to grant the vote to people who are, in common parlance, mad, undermines the foundations of representative democracy. That system, for all its imperfections, is based upon the idea that adults are rational individuals capable of making conscious choices. By suggesting that mental patients are as well qualified as those of sound mind to participate in the political process, Mr. Straw's proposal degrades the entire electorate and democracy itself."

That is about right.

The homeless have been disfranchised, often through no fault of their own. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale made the serious point that great care must be taken when enfranchising the homeless—to which I do not object—to avoid increasing the possibility of fraud. Those who have more knowledge of such matters than me, including members of the all-party group on homelessness, of which I am a member, say that many people who are on the streets have been discharged from mental hospitals. Again, we must be careful whom we enfranchise. I am sure that the Minister has taken that into account.

I want to reiterate a point that several of my hon. Friends made. Before we make changes that can facilitate fraud, we should establish a system that can check on multiple voting. If students vote twice, we should know that; if Members of Parliament vote twice, we should also know that. Such a system should be practised before we make it easier to commit fraud.

I want to draw attention to another possibility of abuse that relates to fraud and postal voting. I am sure that many hon. Members have visited residential homes for the elderly during election campaigns. I do not intend to do that again under the same circumstances as my previous visit. I was encouraged to go to such a home, where there were some fine people. However, I am not sure whether they knew who I was.

Mr. David Taylor (North–West Leicestershire): That is because the hon. Gentleman is never in Blaby.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman claims that I am never in Blaby. I must tell my neighbour that I spend a great deal of time there. I know that candidates from other parties visit residential homes and I am sure that they have had the same experience as me. Postal or proxy votes can be abused, and the system should be more stringent. Someone who cannot make a decision should not continue to be enfranchised. Postal votes are not a panacea. The Minister should consider that.

Unlike most Members of Parliament, I have voted as a service man. While I welcome changes that make voting easier for the services, the system is currently fairly easy. It was a problem to persuade service men to make a service declaration and register to vote. Service men are usually young men—and women nowadays—who are between 18 and 23 and they have other matters on their minds. Traditionally, few in that age group vote. However, it is easy to do so. In 1979 and 1983, I helped to return a Conservative Government by voting in person; in 1987, I was able to vote by proxy because I was abroad. It was easy.

The hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) made good points about clause 9 and the electoral register. I want to approach the matter from the point of view of security. Some individuals, including Members of Parliament and former Ministers in both Houses, have a serious problem with security against terrorism. Many of my hon. Friends have said that they do not wish to be found through the electoral roll—I am sure that that also applies to other hon. Members. For that reason, I have registered in Westminster only recently, although I have lived there for eight years. It should be possible to register anonymously. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale said that he was willing to discuss providing for special cases with the Government. The Select Committee on Home Affairs envisages making very special cases.

The anxiety about Irish terrorism continues; I hope it will disappear soon. A bomb was placed under Airey Neave's car outside his flat in Westminster; Ian Gow was blown up outside his constituency home. Both were traced through the electoral roll or publications such as "Who's Who". A famous case occurred in Bristol in 1985, when a university lecturer went through an electoral roll and identified various members of the services, and others, whom an IRA active service unit wanted to target. I hope that the Minister will address that important issue.

Linked with my previous point is the need to register one's address on a ballot paper. I know from his contribution that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) will disagree with me. I have lived in or on the borders of my constituency since I was selected as a candidate. I confess that I live 100 yd outside my constituency, but I can throw a stone across the border—*[Interruption.]* My neighbours would take a dim view of my throwing stones, but there are no neighbours between me and the river Avon, which marks the border. Many Labour Members would be embarrassed because they do not live in their constituencies. I am not sure whether the Home Secretary spends much time in Blackburn, but he is not here to defend himself, so I shall not ask. The Minister for the Environment has three houses, and I do not know which one he counts as home. However, I make a serious point about security. There may be a security problem on account of terrorism, lunatics or stalkers.

We should examine carefully the proposal in clause 10 for pilot schemes under which voting can take place on more than one day. It is worth considering the history of

electoral reform. Various electoral reforms took place in 1918 after the great war. The Representation of the People Act 1918 increased the electorate from its pre-war figure of 8 million to 21 million, granted the vote to men over 21 and women over 30—a discrepancy that would be considered ill judged on both sides of the House nowadays. The Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 allowed women to become Members of Parliament. Countess Markiewicz was the first woman Member of Parliament. She was elected in Dublin for Sinn Fein, but never took her seat. The Redistribution Act 1918 increased the size of the House of Commons and adopted the principle, with which we all agree, of equal constituency sizes. The first general election that was held on only one day took place in 1918—elections had previously been held over several days. If we intend to change that, we should study history and ascertain whether it has served us better to hold elections on only one day. There is no advantage to voting on more than one day.

Lack of interest is a genuine problem. As politicians, we are all interested in politics. However, it does not grab the attention of others in the same way. I am sorry about that, and we should consider how we can interest others. We care, others do not. That has nothing to do with the difficulties of voting; it is not difficult to vote in this country. I accept that some people are disfranchised. However, although hereditary peers were disfranchised for one day last week, I admit that I do not believe that that was the end of the world. It is generally easy to vote and easy to register.

Abstention is a respectable political act. The Bill's attempts to persuade people to vote in supermarkets or mobile voting stations are patronising and nannying. Everyone knows that they can vote if they want to do that. If the Government made politics and Parliament more important, people would vote in local elections. The previous Government reduced the importance of local authorities over several years; that was not necessarily a good thing.

Mr. David Taylor: The hon. Gentleman voted for it.

Mr. Robathan: I believe that it was before my time. However, the Government reduce the importance of Parliament by making announcements outside Parliament; by appointing the first Attorney-General from outside the House of Commons for many years; by appointing unelected cronies such as people who shared a flat with the Prime Minister; and by appointing a Lord Chancellor who was the Prime Minister's pupil master. That cannot be right or good for democratic politics.

There are also unelected regional development agencies—in my case, the East Midlands development agency.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): The hon. Gentleman says that certain things are not good for democracy. Does he accept that a third of the electorate not participating in the previous general election was not good for democracy and that anything we can do—including the implementation of the measures in the Bill—is bound to improve that situation?

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman is not quite right: 71.5 per cent. of the electorate voted in the previous general election.

Mr. Love: The figure that the hon. Gentleman produces relates to those who are registered to vote. It is estimated that about 91 or 92 per cent. of the population are registered, so a third did not turn out.

Mr. Robathan: Nevertheless, that does not change the point. People may make a genuine decision to abstain or, for all sorts of reasons—the hon. Gentleman will know what they are—determine that they do not want to be registered; some may relate to criminal activities. It is easy to register and vote in this country; it just requires a bit of effort. Whatever Labour Members may think, the British public are not that stupid—they are quite capable of registering and voting—and Members of Parliament are living examples of how easy it is to vote, because we manage to do so weekly.

To return to the east midlands and regional development agencies, the East Midlands development agency is unelected—as is the regional assembly—and such organisations do not bolster Parliament. Conservative Members believe, and many Labour Members know in their hearts, that the Government are undermining and ignoring Parliament and taking power from the representatives of the people, which is why people may think it not worth voting. I would like politics to be made more relevant to people, both locally and nationally, and the importance of Parliament and county and other councils should be stressed. To answer the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love), that is the way to rebuild confidence and to increase participation. Allowing people to vote at supermarket checkouts is not the way to increase participation and make Parliament and other elected Assemblies more relevant.

7.43 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I am rather saddened by the contribution of the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), because we have heard plenty of examples of why people, through no fault of their own, do not vote. Although our system—compared with many others world wide—offers people many opportunities to vote, major obstacles still prevent them from taking up their democratic right. I agree with him that merely modernising the way we vote will not increase the turnout at elections. The way in which we all carry out and talk about our politics and communicate to our electors what we are doing as constituency Members of Parliament, as well as the way in which they represent their views and attempt to influence us, are all part and parcel of giving politics in this country a good name. We must encourage people to think that voting in elections is worth while.

I was disappointed in the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), who is unfortunately no longer in his seat, because he talked about delaying the progress of many of the radical ideas and modernising ways forward presented to us in the Bill. That is no surprise, because Conservative forces have not been at the forefront of

[Caroline Flint]

extending suffrage or the reform of our electoral system; they have been dragged to it by the prospect of turmoil in the country caused by the majority being disallowed to take part in a system that they were entitled to use. Conservative forces also have no credit to their name in respect of women being given the vote.

On a more positive note, I welcome the cross-party collaboration on the working party, which was chaired by the Under–Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth). I made a submission to it and have also written to Home Office Ministers on issues surrounding election campaigning and representation. Despite the Bill being somewhat technical, it holds a seed of a revolution in British political participation. As we prepare to enter the new century, it is apt that we are reviewing a system that has remained fundamentally unchanged for years and years. That review, along with consideration of the way in which we present politics and the plans for citizenship lessons in our schools, will go some way to increasing participation in elections.

At present, the register disfranchises people through no fault of their own. I have to admit that this year is my 20th in the Labour party and I have been a campaigner all those years. *[Interruption.]* It is true.

Mr. David Taylor: My hon. Friend must have joined the party when she was in playschool.

Caroline Flint: If my hon. Friends want to make interventions they should stand up and do so; I should be happy to take them.

Hon. Members, whatever political party they represent, will all have met constituents who had moved into their area but could not vote because they had missed the magic point at which the register was drawn up. Furthermore, how difficult do we make voting for people who were registered within a borough, constituency, ward or European boundary, but moved house in the period between registration and polling day? They have to go back to a polling station in the area in which they were living when they went on the register. Such things happen not because people do not want to vote—I hope that the hon. Member for Blaby is taking note of this—but because they are prevented from voting or obstacles are put in their way.

According to Home Office studies, there are huge inaccuracies in our electoral registers, with up to 7 per cent. of names wrongly allocated to particular addresses, duplication of electors and registers being out of date before they are even in force. The provision of a rolling register is a very welcome innovation and I look forward to the day when a family can move into my constituency and register to vote as easily as it can sign up to pay council tax or set up direct debits to pay electricity, gas and water bills.

On pensioners, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) gave a most poignant illustration—I send my condolences to her on the loss of her mother—and there could be no more vivid illustration of the situation. Many pensioners rightly say that they do not want a postal vote because they want to vote at the polling station. I understand that, but regardless of pensioners' desire to vote in person, we are locked into a system that does not take account of circumstances—caused by infirmity, increasing age or sudden illness—that can prevent them from taking up that choice.

We should give every pensioner two options on postal votes: they should all be sent a postal voting form that they could either send in or relinquish at the polling station. That would ensure that those who cannot rely on having good health from one year to the next could vote. It would be quite simple to put such a provision in place: those over a certain age could tick a box on the registration form and it would automatically come into force. There is no reason why that should not happen. I have met many pensioners who want to vote at the polling station, and if they were given those two options they would not feel that they had to make a concession to advancing age by having to apply for a postal vote. Considering any measure that would make the postal vote application system simpler—not only for pensioners, but for the many people who do shift work or take holidays at election time—would be very worth while indeed.

I am particularly attracted to the opportunity provided by the Bill for establishing different pilot schemes for helping to increase participation in voting. It is right to establish such schemes because there is as yet no evidence to suggest that holding elections on Saturdays or Sundays or using different ways of voting will make a difference. That is why I am pleased that each of the pilot schemes will have to report back to the Secretary of State. Not only that, they will have to publish in their locality, so that the public have access to it, clear data and information on turnout, problems that came up and how any innovation was received by the general public.

My submission to the working party proposed an extension of the polling period from one day to a week. I shall explain that in more detail. In each ward, the returning officer could designate a popular site that is accessible to the whole community in the week running up to polling day. It may be a supermarket, a post office or a library. On polling day itself, people would be able to vote in the normal polling stations in every district. That would enable people to vote in the traditional way on polling day at polling stations in their residential area, but would also give them the chance to vote during the rest of the week at their supermarket, library or wherever is easily accessible.

It is extraordinary that it is easier for people to buy a weekly lottery ticket than to vote in an election. Technology offers a host of ideas that are worth considering. For example, people could vote electronically at the polling station, and when the polls close it would be easy to take the information from the electronic booths and get a result within a short time, instead of having countless council officers counting papers at the town hall.

During my own count at the general election, we used a computer to ascertain the result to within a couple of votes at least four hours before the tellers did so, at 4.30 in the morning. It may be more cost effective to use such technology than it is to use tired people who have served at polling stations all day and go on to work at the count throughout the night.

Mr. Grieve: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady in mid-flow, but I am concerned that she may move on to something else. She has made many interesting points, which will need to be investigated. The pilot schemes will be very important. She said that one of the merits of those schemes is that a report will have to be given to the Home Secretary, and I fully endorse that. As it is ultimately for the House to safeguard democratic rights in this country, does she think it a good thing for the Home Secretary to decide that a particular pilot scheme appeals to him and for it to be implemented by resolution of the House, without its being the subject of a Bill?

Caroline Flint: The Committee will have to give that point further consideration. I am sure that there will be extensive discussion as the pilot schemes publish their reports. There will be plenty of opportunity inside and outside Parliament to discuss the relative merits of the schemes. We must make progress on these issues, and I hope that the Home Secretary will ensure that any directions he gives will be based on a proper evaluation of what has been shown to work in the pilot schemes.

Low turnouts in elections are not just the fault of the system: political parties carry a large measure of responsibility. We must all take responsibility for the decline in interest in politics over the past 20 years. The political system must be open, transparent and confer genuine power on the public. To that end, I support discussion and technological innovation. My only proviso would be that we should ensure that the means of using new technology provides equality, so that the technology is available to a majority of people. We could make a case for the telephone, but only a small, though significant, number of people feel confident about using the internet and computers, even for games, and most homes do not have access to a computer. We should ensure that there is equality of access to the technology before we decide on a particular route.

I should like the Minister to consider a case in my constituency. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) gave a similar example. The count for the Rossington parish council in my constituency was held on the Friday after the local elections. I have no doubt that the candidates who attended were, like the local authority staff and the returning officer, a bit jaded after the previous late night. Unfortunately, a mistake was made in the result.

There were 22 candidates seeking one of the 12 places available, and by a simple error a candidate was awarded the 12th place, which a Labour candidate, Barry Johnson, should have won by 11 votes. When the error came to light after the result was confirmed, the returning officer conceded the error. The other candidate could raise no argument, because it was a pure error and the count had been conducted properly. There was no question of the count being improper.

Mr. Johnson, however, had to go through the whole palaver of drawing up a petition to the High Court, retaining solicitors, sending notices to all other candidates and coming to London for a costly High Court petition that was uncontested. He won the petition, and he is now duly serving on the Rossington parish council.

We should examine how we can modify the law to allow returning officers to issue a correction to results within a fixed period in the event of an error. I hope that my hon. Friend will consider my request carefully and see whether it is possible to accommodate it in the Bill.

7.56 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I want to avoid repeating some of the comments that have already been made. Broadly speaking, there is much to welcome in the Government's proposals. There is much we can do to improve the way in which voting is carried out in this country. I am all in favour of experiments and pilot schemes, and I welcome those aspects of the Bill.

My reluctance to give the Bill approval on Second Reading stems from one issue alone, although I have other reservations. We are passing what is, in effect, a Henry VIII clause entitling the Home Secretary, after having considered the results of the pilot schemes, to implement or make such changes as he sees fit subject to approval by the House on a short resolution. I have had occasion in the past to express my deepest reservations about the use of Henry VIII clauses in such circumstances. Whether it is the Human Rights Act 1998, which the Minister knows I broadly supported, or legislation such as this, it is uniquely a matter for Parliament to determine what method it thinks is best. If that takes a little of Parliament's time, it does not matter.

Doubtless the pilot schemes, if they are successful, will present a wide variety of possibilities and choices. Listening to the hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), I was immediately struck by the fact that she was coming up with ideas that may not be floated through the pilot schemes. *[Interruption.]* I detect that the hon. Lady wants me to give way, and I am happy to do so.

Caroline Flint: No.

Mr. Grieve: I apologise; I thought for one moment that the hon. Lady wanted me to give way.

The House should be able to consider the options, table amendments and discuss the matter in Committee in the ordinary way. My reluctance to support this measure is not because I think that it is ill-intended; I think that it is well-intended—however, I shall not give my support to a measure that will make potentially major changes to our system of elections after only a three-hour debate in the House. I am sorry, but I am just not willing to do that. I hope that the Government will reconsider. I dare say that the Committee stage will be taken upstairs: I am not sure whether the Bill will be treated as a constitutional measure. If I have the opportunity to intervene in Committee, it will be to make the point that the Henry VIII clause is a bad part of the Bill.

Now that I have got that off my chest, there are a number of details—

Mr. Mike O'Brien: For the sake of clarification, as the question has been raised by a number of Members, I can confirm that we intend the Committee stage to take place on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Grieve: I am obliged to the Minister. I also apologise for having had to leave the Chamber for about an hour, possibly when that was being explained, to attend a meeting of the Church and nation committee of the Church of Scotland.

I am concerned about one or two matters, although I hope for reassurance. Clause 13 deals with persons with disabilities. I am all in favour of giving such people the opportunity to vote, and I would certainly be worried if

[Mr. Grieve]

someone who had decided that he wished to vote was prevented from doing so because of his physical disabilities. I welcome clause 13 for that reason, and hope that it will work in the way in which it is intended to work.

However, I must express a slight worry, born of an event that I witnessed with my own eyes when I fought a Lambeth seat in 1987. A substantial number of persons with quite severe physical, but also learning, disabilities—about a dozen—were brought to the polling station by their carers, who wished to persuade the returning officer that they had expressed an intention on how they wished to vote, and that he should record their vote accordingly. It was apparent to me, a spectator standing beside them, that they had formed no view whatever about the election, that they might well be ignorant of the fact that a vote was taking place at all, and that they were probably incapable of making up their minds about how to vote.

I trust that the measure, as drafted, will be accompanied by regulatory procedures or guidelines sufficient to enable the necessary distinctions to be made by the officer dealing with the polling station involved. I considered what I saw on that occasion to be scandalous: it was simply a piece of exploitation. It was said earlier—by, I think, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan)—that such practices were not unknown in old people's homes and nursing homes.

These may be matters of detail, and of course there is always a balance to be struck. We must ensure that people are not wrongly denied the opportunity to vote, although there may be a risk that people will cast votes when they had no intention or desire to do so. However, the issue merits consideration; otherwise, we risk bringing the system of election into disrepute. As I have said, I was shocked by what I saw on the occasion to which I have referred. It was a travesty of what an election should be about.

I was slightly surprised that the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) should raise the issue—which, I accept, does not feature in the Bill—of the length of time for which someone might be out of the country before being deprived of the right to vote. I was staggered by what I heard. This country has always prided itself on the fact that, unlike other countries, it does not apply rules that deprive people of the right to British citizenship because they happen to be citizens of another state. I have always considered that to be rather important.

My late mother regularly voted in both French and United Kingdom elections because she had dual nationality, and at one time had residence in both countries at the same time. It never struck me that the one was incompatible with the other, and I am sure that the Minister will feel able to agree with that principle. We know that many citizens of the Irish Republic effectively exercise citizenship rights in both countries with no difficulty, and, indeed, without formal dual nationality.

I hope that the Government will put all such thoughts aside when considering the appropriate length of time for which a person should be allowed the vote. It has been suggested that 20 years is too long for someone who has previously been resident. I am prepared to consider a shortening of that period, but, if the issue is to be raised in the future, we should bear in mind that increasingly, in the mobile society in which we live and given its international dimension, individuals leave the country for long periods, but continue to take an active interest in its affairs and have a desire to return. There is no evidence that the system has been abused. It has been suggested that, because few people take up the opportunity, it is worthless, but the number who take up the opportunity may reflect the number who feel sufficiently concerned to do so. That is no reason for us to deprive people of that opportunity if they have a contribution to make.

Clause 6 deals with:

"Notional residence: declarations of local connection".

I welcome any measure that extends the franchise to those who are clearly eligible to vote in this country, but may not be able to exercise their right. I am all in favour of homeless people being able to have a point of contact enabling them to exercise a specific right to which they are plainly entitled. That causes me no concern, and I shall be happy to help to devise any system to facilitate it.

I share the fear of some of my hon. Friends—a fear that may be shared by Members on both sides of the House—that personation of voters and abuse of the system are taking place. We have little idea of the extent to which that occurs, but most of us have ample anecdotal evidence that the registering of people who are likely to occupy very temporary addresses has been exploited in order to lay hands on voting cards so that other people can, effectively, vote without their consent. The Home Secretary said that such action was a serious criminal offence, and I wholly accept that, but I venture to suggest that this is one of the criminal offences for which the offender stands a limited chance of being caught, unless he is unlucky enough to be recognised at the polling station as someone who has voted before, or as someone known not to be the person whose voting card he is handing in.

Having made those preliminary comments, I hope to participate actively in later discussion on the Floor of the House. I am grateful to the Government for saying that the Committee stage will be taken on the Floor. I am sorry that I cannot support the Bill tonight. In many respects, I should have liked to do so, but I return to my original criticism: it is bad practice simply to say that pilot schemes can be turned into a complete change in our electoral roll system as a result of rubber stamping by the House after a short debate. That is not what I understand parliamentary democracy to be about, and it is certainly not what my electors would wish me to vote for.

8.9 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I was feeling upbeat because I thought this Bill to be, in many respects, not very controversial, but rather one that could genuinely improve representation. I am a little less happy after listening to the speeches of Opposition Members, who have made rather a meal of a number of the clauses and issues involved. I understand their right to oppose and to draw various conclusions from some of the changes that are being introduced, but I am not sure whether this is the right time to do some of the things that they have been doing. It would have been much more appropriate to allow the Bill to go through Second Reading and then to raise detailed objections and make significant improvements in Committee.

The Bill is the first stage of looking for improvements. It is likely to be followed by the political parties funding Bill later in the Session. The two together mean that the Government have put their foot firmly in the water to improve this country's electoral processes. They come on the back of what I see as a major series of constitutional changes. The Government are certainly reforming when it comes to the constitution. We have to look only at their policies on devolution, the House of Lords, modernising local government—which is partly referred to in the Bill, but will come in train later—and modernising the House of Commons.

As a member of the Modernisation Committee—a quick plug there—I was pleased to see the start of the Westminster Hall experiment today. It showed the best of Parliament, as the reform slipped in seamlessly and was welcomed by all sides, including those who, perhaps, had some doubts whether it was the right way to go. In view of today's turnout and the quality of debate, we can feel proud—it is an opportunity whose time has come and we should make the most of it.

The Bill contains four key principles, which are important in their own right. First, it provides another stage in the development of the modernisation agenda; secondly, it is about increasing participation; thirdly, it is about fairness and justice; and last but not least it is about, I hope, getting better representation, if not better representatives.

I tread gently here because the Jenkins report is not mentioned in any way in the Bill, even though it examines the electoral system. Indeed, the report is yet to be voted on. As someone who tends to favour electoral reform, I think that we cannot just pass over the report—the debate will have to happen. Perhaps the Bill will lead us towards that debate, although it will not happen quite yet.

We need to look at how the key principles that I have identified take us forward. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made a good defence when he was accused of not consulting widely on the matter. It was unfair and unrealistic for the Opposition to make such an accusation. My right hon. Friend listed a number of ways in which he had gone out of his way to consult, either directly through Government action, or, more particularly, by making representations to the Home Affairs Committee. The way in which the Government responded was laudable and interesting.

I shall concentrate on two issues that have not been widely covered in the debate so far—there is no point in going over old ground. The first is the impact on local government. Again, that is part and parcel of the agenda to modernise local government. I should like the measure to kick start some of the other changes that local government should be encouraged to introduce. The Green Paper "Modernising local government: local democracy and community leadership" showed only too clearly how the turnout in local government elections has declined, the repercussions of that decline and why we need, if nothing else, to refurbish our local government system, so that people genuinely get back to participating in that form of government. It is worth while aiming towards that, even if we also want to look at the wider parliamentary stage.

I am not sure whether my intervention on the Home Secretary came at the right time because he did not quite answer it, but perhaps my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary could refer to it when he replies to the debate. It dealt with the link to citizenship in general. I made the point about the importance—although perhaps it has not had as much debate as it could have—of the Crick report on education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy.

Let no one misunderstand that the changes will be embedded for some considerable time. The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) went through some of the history of reform; I could do so, too. Reform tends to come in 100-year bites, or not much less than that. What we do today will be in place for a considerable time. Some of us would like much more rapid change and more radical opportunities, but what we do will stay in place for some time. Therefore, today we are legislating for the next generation and possibly the generation after that.

Those generations will be interested in having different access. They will be the children of the internet; we cannot fool ourselves and think that they will be anything else. They will have grown up in the electronic world, yet we may try to foist on them old-fashioned methods. At the very least, we should listen to what young people have to say. They are not put off by politics. They are only too aware of and interested in green issues, for example, let alone world debt and so on. Unfortunately, when I go to schools they tell me that they find the political system somewhat difficult to take. They do not understand all its implications and do not find it very accessible. We should do all we can to make it more accessible to them. It should not be our only or main consideration, but it should be a consideration.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one way to increase voter participation is to introduce teaching about government and politics in schools—not at 16 for A-levels, but at the age of 11?

Mr. Drew: I could not agree more. One of the things that I banged on about before coming to this place was the sad decline in citizenship education. The last Conservative Government did not help—they had a policy of discouraging, in all sorts of ways, the politicisation of the curriculum, as some people saw it. As always with such things, it can be done badly, but if it is done well, it can yield many benefits.

I am saddened that a Bill which, in the main, hon. Members agree to across the Chamber has not achieved the consensus that it should have done. I want to examine some of its detail. I was out of the Chamber for a short time to attend an unavoidable meeting, but otherwise I have not heard any hon. Member say that he or she is opposed in principle to the idea of a rolling register. All hon. Members could quote examples of people who have claimed to have been disfranchised through no fault of their own. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Henschel of Whitminster moved in before the local election, prior to the general election. They were staggered that, although they moved in well in time for that election, they could not get on to the register. The simple fact is that we have

[Mr. Drew]

utterly failed to keep up to date with the technology that permits us to maximise people's participation in the electoral system.

Mr. Evans: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that many Conservative Members accept great chunks of the Bill, but have reservations about the sweeping powers that the Home Secretary would have after the pilots to introduce the systems wholesale over the country, with just an affirmative resolution of the House?

Mr. Drew: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. Many of those issues could be considered in Committee, where there would be considerable consensus. We are having a debate on the principle of the Bill. The Opposition, for reasons best known to themselves, are opposing it in principle, which I find somewhat strange and difficult to understand.

I shall refer briefly to some of the other issues. I am aware that other hon. Members are waiting to speak and I do not want to take up their time. We have argued effectively about the need to bring in groups who have been disfranchised through no fault of their own, including the homeless and temporary residents of mental institutions—they are often there voluntarily, which makes it unfair to exclude them. It will still be possible to prevent some people from voting, but those who have made a decision to go to such places should have the right to use their vote.

I am particularly interested in the declaration of local connection. It sounds a bit new Labourish, but I think that I know what it means. We are trying to overcome the problem of someone having to have a residency to allow them to vote.

It is a shame that the hon. Member for Blaby is not in his place. As a former service man, he said that he had found it easy to cast his vote. I have been on the armed forces parliamentary scheme during the past year and found it interesting to talk to service people. Many of them said that it was not easy to vote, largely because, for various reasons, they were doing back-to-back tours of duty. We have to be more flexible in how we allow people to register. Many service people have moved to Germany and have no particular residency in this country. We should make the maximum effort to allow them to register and vote in this country.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman put great emphasis on the fact that some patients in mental hospitals are there voluntarily. I welcome the fact that patients who have been sectioned under the Mental Health Acts will also have a right to vote. Does he agree that there is ample evidence that people get sectioned for all sorts of different reasons, which do not disqualify them from exercising a judgment on which party to support at a general election?

Mr. Drew: I agree with that helpful intervention. I apologise if I had misconstrued the Bill. People should not be disfranchised just because they happen to be in a certain place.

Many of the advantages of the Bill are for local government. Parliament is not excluded from the experimentation, but it is aimed principally at reinvigorating local government. We shall then be able to judge whether the improvements yield the greater participation that we all want.

Mr. David Heath: The hon. Gentleman and I both have experience in local government. People's interest in local government will be reinvigorated only if it has the power to change things that people care about. Only when we release the shackles from local councils and allow them to do the job that they are elected to do will people become interested in them again.

Mr. Drew: There is a kernel of truth in what the hon. Gentleman says, but the Bill is also about allowing people access so that they can express their opinion on what their local councils are doing. We need to meet in the middle on that. Many of the proposals will be directly relevant to local government. The Bill is about reinvigorating local government and ensuring transparency in its operation and elections.

The Jenkins commission is not directly related to the Bill, but there is a natural connection. We have to deal with the issue of electoral reform. I support the idea, but there are Members on both sides of the House who do not. We need to have that debate because it is important that people should have a choice about the electoral system for this place as well as for other bodies.

The link with the electoral commission will be largely covered in the Bill on the regulation of the party funding system. Will it be possible to evaluate, review and perhaps educate through the commission, so that we can ensure that the changes are having the desired effect? We also need a process to enable us to tinker further to produce tangible improvements without having to resort to more primary legislation. Has any thought been given to the electoral commission and how the proposals may embed themselves within it?

This is a good Bill that will produce significant improvements and be a stepping stone towards further measures. It is important that it should be passed. I had hoped that the whole House would adopt a consensual approach, but unfortunately that does not seem to be the case. Let us see in Committee how we can take matters forward to improve representation in this place and elsewhere.

8.26 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) criticised the Conservatives for failing to wave the Bill through and give it a fair wind even though we have some serious concerns about it. That was in tune with the comments of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who criticised Her Majesty's Opposition for breaching a consensus or refusing to allow one to be reached. In matters of electoral reform in particular, it is for the Government to bring forward innovation and change to ensure that their proposals enjoy consensus. The fact that we are stating our objections to the proposals cannot be held against us. Like other Conservative Members who have spoken, I endorse many parts of the Bill, but I also have serious concerns about it.

We were drawn down a side alley, which may have been a preview of discussions that we shall have on another Bill in the near future. I want to respond to some

of the points made by the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton). He was adamant that those who pay no tax should not be able to vote in this country. I am concerned about a large number of British people who habitually reside overseas—pensioners who may have paid tax over their working lives. In that sense, they have contributed financially. Many have contributed in other ways, such as by fighting for this country. They may live overseas for part of the year, or for the whole year. Those people should not be disqualified from voting in elections in a country about which they care so deeply. That is especially true when many of them draw pensions from this country, and they have a right to express views on the way in which their pensions are treated.

We have been reminded recently—not least by some unfortunate behaviour in the Gallery a few days ago—that pensioners feel strongly about the principle of what they have contributed during their working lives while they have been paying taxes, and they have feelings and beliefs about what they deserve in return. They believe that they should be able to represent those views through the democratic process. That is no less so if they happen to be resident in another country—perhaps another European country.

This a typical new Labour Bill, as it spectacularly misses the point. The Bill seeks to address the question of low turnouts without recognising—as the Home Secretary appeared to do in one or two earlier observations—that the key cause of low turnouts is low interest in the political process; in some instances, lack of interest. It is not because it is too hard to vote or—as the Prime Minister appears to believe when he sees low turnouts in by-elections in constituencies held by his own party—because people are universally happy with everything that is going on in the country and with the Government's performance.

It is not because there are insufficient numbers of elections or opportunities for them to cast their votes. One outcome of the Government's actions—which will result inevitably in lower turnouts—is that people are becoming sick of the number of times that they are being asked to go out and vote. They are asked to vote for representative assemblies which have little power and which cannot take independent action. They are asked to vote for new bodies which many people did not want in the first place. In the near future, the people of London will be asked to vote for a London mayor, a post that was not wanted by the majority of people in the first place.

The piling on of new layers of government or—as Labour Members might say—of new opportunities to participate in the electoral process, is not what people really want. People want to be able to register a vote—or perhaps two or three—that will really matter and will return people to institutions with some power to affect their lives. The Government's behaviour in increasing the numbers of elections will not achieve higher participation—quite the reverse.

The experiment in the European elections—with which the hon. Member for Stroud may have agreed, but about which I had grave reservations—provided absolute proof that, by making the electoral system more complex and by breaking the link between a single representative and the elector, the Government achieved a new low in turnouts in the national elections of just over 23 per cent. It increased confusion among the electorate and massively decreased the interest that the electorate had in that part of the process.

The Government have missed the point, and some points of detail are traps in the Bill. The possibility of weekend voting—which may be prejudicial against certain minorities—leads the Home Secretary to give an assurance that, if there is weekend voting, it must be on a Saturday and a Sunday. I welcome that, but if we are to depart from the principle of elections being confined to a single day, it is vital that we have sensible controls on the way in which polling can be conducted during the process. The prospect of a running commentary on the outcome of an election, which could influence the turnout and voting behaviour during an election over two or more days, would be a matter of concern.

The introduction of new voting technology and techniques risks increased confusion—particularly for the elderly, but not exclusively so. Again, if confusion is increased by perhaps unnecessary changes, there is a danger that we will turn people off the whole process and discourage participation.

Electronic vote counting or the electronic registration of votes is seen by some hon. Members as a great way forward to the 21st century, and they believe that it will increase security and prevent electoral fraud. There may be other advantages. However, all hon. Members will have stood in a church hall or a leisure centre when a vote is being counted, and they and their counting agents will have scrutinised what is there on paper. Electronic voting may appear to be much more efficient, to accelerate the counting of votes and to be a great technological and electoral advance, but what happens if the votes that have been cast cannot be verified? What final guarantee is there if there is no tangible evidence of how people have cast their votes?

We all know that scrutiny of votes is not scientific because one cannot be certain of what has happened, but it provides some check and the ability to ascertain where the cross was placed by a particular voter on a particular ballot paper. If we adopt electronic voting, that will not be possible. Computers might be able to generate lists of people on electoral rolls who have voted in a particular way, but it will be difficult to verify that that is how people intended to cast their votes. It might be a computer error, a programming error, or even a deliberate attempt to change the outcome of an election.

We have discussed the development of an edited register of electors. What is there to prevent bogus or single-issue political groups from obtaining a register for political reasons and abusing it? Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby raised the issue of the security of people on the register who may be targets for terrorists or other groups.

What is the logic in allowing declarations of local connections that would allow homeless people to register to vote but not allowing someone who might be at risk from terrorist attack to register only a local connection instead of an address on the electoral register? I listened with interest to the points made by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on that issue, and I have sympathy with them, not least because of his recent experiences. In some instances, the threat to an individual may be so extreme that there may be a better way to proceed.

[Mr. Graham Brady]

The declaration of local connections might also lead to abuse, as my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) suggested. There is a possibility that people might be able to claim a local connection to several places, especially if they are sleeping rough in a city or town centre, and that they might claim a connection to a place with a particular electoral balance. There is room for abuse, although that is not necessarily a reason not to pursue the reform. We must consider the issue very carefully.

Mr. Drew: That point has been made several times before, but I struggle to understand why people in such circumstances would want to make multiple registrations.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Gentleman may have a point. He may also have put his finger on a broader point that people who are sleeping rough have often opted out of community life and may therefore not have the slightest interest in voting for him, or for me or for any other hon. Member. People may indeed choose to abstain or to fail to register, and those are legitimate options.

Mr. Evans: The Bill makes no mention of by-elections, but people might flood into an area to register after an hon. Member dies, so that they can have a vote in the subsequent by-election.

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend is right, and he raises the spectre of people who are not genuinely homeless or without a permanent address behaving in that way because they are politically motivated. I do not suggest that that is a likely scenario, but we must legislate with a view to the possibilities that could arise.

I come back to the point of my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), which shows why there is a principled objection to the Bill. It does not present a schedule of changes that the House is being asked to accept. Instead, it will enable the Home Secretary to experiment with various pilot schemes in different parts of the country, which could have various outcomes. I do not suggest that the Home Secretary would engage in gerrymandering, but if, in future, an unprincipled Home Secretary wished to achieve party political advantage, the Bill would enable him or her to take an à la carte view of the electoral law. The Bill provides a Home Secretary with the opportunity to try any number of different electoral arrangements. It is a question not of the Home Secretary or the House then accepting or rejecting them, but of the Home Secretary's opportunity to pick and choose between different options. That could be done without primary legislation, with relatively little opportunity for House of Commons scrutiny. This measure could be used to affect the political process in the future.

We must look at the turnouts in general elections, European elections and local elections and at the stories that lie behind those figures. Again, I echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby and, to do the Home Secretary justice, I think that he gave a nod in this direction at the beginning of his speech. People vote—or not—because they have a pretty good idea of what voting in a particular election will mean and how much difference it will make to their lives. In 1979, 32.7 per cent. of people voted in the European elections. That figure rose dramatically to a high of 33 per cent. in 1984, before plunging to a low of 23.3 per cent. in this year's elections. That shows clearly how important the European Parliament is to people.

I accept that the Conservative party shares with the Government a considerable amount of blame for the fact that the diminution of the rights and responsibilities of local government has had an effect in that 40 per cent. of people—the number is frequently far less—vote in local elections. Again, the public are wondering how important such elections are to them, and what effect the results will have on their lives. For some people, the effect can be significant, but often, they think that voting is not worth the effort.

The turnout in general elections is proof of that. On the whole, people still believe that the House of Commons can make a difference to their lives. There has never been a turnout of less than 70 per cent. since 1970 and, while the turnout was as high as 78.8 per cent. in the first of the 1974 elections, it was as low as 71.5 per cent. in 1997. Again, I suggest that the Government have drawn the wrong conclusion from those figures. The reduced turnout was not because it was more difficult to vote, because participation in the electoral process was less attractive, or because it was harder to register on the electoral roll. It is an indictment of all political parties that people did not believe that how they voted would make much difference to their lives.

The result was not a ringing endorsement for the Labour party, which, historically, did not achieve a very high vote in 1997, nor was it a ringing endorsement of the Conservative party. There was clearly a desire to end a long period of Conservative Government, but no great desire for a Labour Government. People were not persuaded that voting would make a great deal of difference to their lives. That is why so few people voted and why the 1997 general election had the lowest turnout since at least 1970.

The myth is that the Government are greatly loved, that people were so confident that the Government would get elected that they did not bother to vote and that they were so ecstatically happy with the Government's election that they gave up voting. I do not think that that hangs together.

However, two items cropped up in my postbag this week that ought to give the House pause for thought. They illustrate what is going wrong, why people are disaffected with the political process and why they do not participate in elections. They also give a clue about what remedy would really make a difference, as opposed to Government proposals to set up polling booths in supermarkets or prisons.

A constituent wrote to tell me about a neighbour, a 10-year-old boy, who felt strongly about a local planning issue. I shall not name him, as I have not spoken to the constituent about the possibility that I would raise the matter. However, the boy was concerned that a historic local building would be pulled down and replaced with a large number of flats, which would increase traffic congestion and damage the environment.

The letter from my constituent said that the boy attended a meeting on the matter, after which he spent several hours writing to local and national politicians, including the Deputy Prime Minister. The letter stated:

"The reply he received was not from your office but from the Government Office for the North West in Manchester who stated that it had been passed to them. This reply was a standard letter, identical to those sent out to local residents who had written on this

subject. The wording and tone of the letter was totally inappropriate to and completely dismissive of this ten year old boy. He was very disappointed. When he moves to secondary school next year and is taught Citizenship, the Local Democratic Process, Parliament and its workings etc,. in his PSE lesson I can imagine that he will be somewhat questioning of the information that he is given."

The letter went on to say that the boy's

"faith in the democratic process must have been dented both by the experience locally and the response to his letters. In eight years time he will be eligible to vote and these experiences are hardly going to encourage him to do this, whether in local or national elections."

That is what happened when a boy of 10 raised real concerns about a matter of direct concern in his locality. He received a brush-off and a standard letter. He did not even get a direct reply from the Deputy Prime Minister's office. That is a cause for concern, as such a response will lead to disaffection and cause people to think that it is not worth voting when they are of an age to do so.

A second example involves letters from constituents worried about live exports of sheep. This week, I received a response from the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. It pointed out that, regardless of the Government's views on the matter, it was not possible to legislate to ban such exports, as to do so would be contrary to EU law.

Constituents write to their Members of Parliament in the expectation that some action will be taken. When they write to me they want to discover my views and the Government's views on the matter at hand. Letters, such as the one about sheep exports that I have described, which say that the Government, the House of Commons and Members of Parliament are unable to do anything about a problem because they are no longer entitled to a view on it must be a cause of dissatisfaction, disinterest and alienation in the political process.

The Government should focus on what people really think about their politicians and the process of government. Can people, through the democratic process, any longer affect what happens to them? That is more important than voting in supermarkets or the rather flippant matters with which the Bill is largely concerned. It sets out few concrete changes, but it gives the Home Secretary an enormous new power to pick and choose changes in the electoral process—changes that may or may not suit one political party or another, but that will do nothing to restore faith in our democratic process.

8.50 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): I thank the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) for two comments that he made about my contributions to the debate on this subject, especially those on the rolling register. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), who serves on the Select Committee on Home Affairs and who is no longer present in the Chamber, also referred to my contributions, while my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that there might have been no Bill if it had not been for some of my work in the past, which might be going a bit over the top. Those comments place a great burden on me now—this speech had better be good, or I will come in for considerable criticism.

I became interested in electoral registration in 1987-88 when I served on the Standing Committee that considered the poll tax Bill—the Local Government Finance Act 1988. It was clear that that legislation would help to destroy electoral registration. I was dubious about whether that was in order, given the standing of the constitutional legislation on electoral registers that it was seeking to destroy.

The 1988 Act certainly destroyed electoral registration in many areas, especially among attainers—people who would then never appear on any register. Soon after that, I discovered that electoral registers were hit by many other factors. We have a rootless, mobile society, and there is much political alienation, to which many hon. Members have referred. Registration levels are poor in bed-sitter land, among black communities, among young people and the mobile of all classes—those who get on their bikes to look for jobs and those who can travel in more comfort while doing so—and in inner cities.

There is probably a 10 per cent. shortfall in electoral registration; furthermore, the shortfall is subject to serious maldistribution, so constituency boundaries are distorted. Those matters should concern us a great deal.

I am conscious of the time and that other hon. Members wish to speak, so I will concentrate on the rolling register, as hon. Members have stressed my interest in that subject, and express my views on the proposal that is before us. Certainly, such a register is the main technique for tackling under-registration. It is welcome that people can, within a reasonable time, transfer their registration as they move to a new area. However, I do not know whether that represents the full version of the rolling register and whether it will roll as quickly and as fully as I would like.

People who move can certainly transfer their registration, but the current register does not have the benefits of the whiz-bang, computerised, e-mail, e-commerce, technologically advanced methods that some people have said will need to be tried. Certainly, we can look at some of those ideas, but they should basically be applied to the rolling register. Once a person moves, the transfer of registration should take place almost automatically. People should be removed from the old register and transferred to the register in the new area.

We have had monthly lists for a while and when people move to a new area they can get on that. However, they have to register 15 days before the end of the month when the register is published to get on to it. Furthermore, once an election is announced—or once the nominations are in—no new lists will be announced. There is a bit of a blockage to inclusion on the rolling register; depending on when people move, it can be between six and 10 weeks before they are registered. If a system of rolling registration could be used under the evils of the poll tax, I do not see why we cannot have a full and continuous rolling register for electoral registration, which is vastly more important for a democratic system.

If such a register rolled continuously until nominations were made, there would be no need for double registration. Several Members have referred to the difficulties and problems of double registration, but it could be ruled out if people registered at their sole or main place of residence—or, for homeless people, their sole or main location. People could move rapidly from one area to another; for example, university students could be registered at their university constituency while at

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college, and back at their home constituency during their long summer break. It should not be beyond the technology to achieve that. We have heard what technology can do to produce fancy voting arrangements, such as weekend provision and access for many people—like the current access to the lottery system. If such techniques are possible, they should be used for the rolling register.

Under the Bill, electoral returning officers are permitted access to local and public authority information in order to assist them for registration purposes. I should prefer a stronger measure whereby it would be compulsory for the officers to use such information—or strong pressure would be put on them to do so. Other forms of information could also be included to improve the register. Those ideas were contained in measures that I proposed in 1993, 1994 and 1995. Technically, civil servants and others would be better placed to produce those measures in order to iron out the difficulties.

We should consider the principle of a high-tech, rolling register that represents real modernisation—rather than merely the best that we can do at the moment; otherwise, we shall have only a veneer of modernity instead of an updated register. I welcome the Bill's proposals for the register, but hope that considerable improvements will be made in Committee, so that my vision of a rolling register can be realised.

I very much welcome the provisions for the registration of homeless people; I have introduced private Member's Bills on that subject. Some people may want checks to deal with some of the worries that have been mentioned. However, a declaration of location so that people can register to vote will enable us to get away from the system under which people can register only when they have a residence and which homeless people find it extremely difficult to get round. The system blocks them and the provisions on their registration are to be welcomed.

The measures to extend registration for people on remand and for mental patients who are not detained are also welcome. There are important provisions on access for the blind and the partially blind, but that is all that there is. Another—greater—possibility would be to extend measures for access for disabled people. The Bill may make it easier for disabled people to register, but they want the same right as able-bodied people to exercise their franchise at the ballot box if they want to do so. They thus need access to polling stations. Scope and others have produced evidence in that connection, and we should take notice.

There were provisions in that connection in the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill, which dealt with rolling registers, and I included a clause on the subject in my Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill. The Government might feel that the matter could be dealt with in other ways. For example, legislation might be contemplated to extend civil rights for disabled people, in which case such a provision might be included. Legislation on the electoral commission may make that much more feasible. However, I hope that we may tease things out to ensure that advances are made for the disabled.

It is an achievement to have the measure before us. It creates the possibility of making the improvement that I have described. I am pleased that the measure will be debated by a Committee of the entire House, as is only correct and constitutional. Although it might be a bit high-flown to rank the measure with the great reform Acts of 1832, 1867, 1884 and so on, it is nevertheless about electoral registration and tidies up the process.

It was believed that universal franchise had finally been delivered by legislation passed in 1918 and 1928. In 1928, when women finally got the vote on the same basis as men, based upon residence, that seemed to be it, and to some extent it was; but society has changed. We have become much more mobile, and some aspects of the current system have provoked disillusion. Therefore we must devote attention to them.

The Bill is therefore very important, and it is important that we have full discussions on the Floor of the House to ensure that what is basically the right approach is followed properly. The subject is of vast importance, and we should act as the heirs of the legacy of the chartists and the suffragettes by ensuring that we offer a full franchise.

9.2 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): It is a great pleasure to follow the excellent speech of the hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), and especially to acknowledge his kindness and consideration in cutting short his remarks on a subject that is, evidently, very close to his heart in order to give other hon. Members a chance to speak. I shall try to follow his example.

In speaking now—unexpectedly, following a constructive and welcome meeting earlier today with the Under–Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien)—I am appealing to the House for cross-party support to help close a loophole in the Representation of the People Act 1983. That loophole is not yet addressed in the Bill, but I have some reason to hope that, if an amendment is moved in Committee, it may not be met with an entirely unsympathetic response from the Government. It relates to section 106(1) of the 1983 Act, which is concerned with the telling of lies about the character or conduct of candidates in elections by people intending to damage their prospects of being returned to Parliament.

I wish to use as an illustration my own experience, which led to a court case that exposed that loophole in the law in the age of the internet. I have previously, on 18 March 1998, mentioned in the House the problem caused by the publication of a scurrilous magazine called *Scallywag*, which specialised in telling lies about the private lives of public figures. It first became notorious in 1993, when it falsely alleged that the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), was conducting an adulterous affair with his caterer. A couple of years later, it announced that on a certain date Buckingham palace would be making a formal declaration that a senior member of the royal family was dying from the AIDS virus. Needless to say, that declaration was never made.

Eventually, in late 1994, the magazine turned its attention to me, and the nub of its accusations was that I was a secret promiscuous homosexual who frequented "male dens of iniquity" and that my girl friend was really a tart, hired from an escort agency to accompany me to constituency selection contests.

Recent events show the lethality of such accusations. Because the author and publishers were destitute, I could not sue them without running up irrecoverable costs.

However, I managed to uncover the secret network of printers and distributors, and I sued them instead. I gained £39,500 in damages and about £70,000 in costs. The accusations were then transferred to the internet, but, foolishly, to a British-based internet company, Demon, whereupon I sued it and gained several thousand pounds in damages and costs from it as well. However, I still could not go after the actual perpetrator because he was financially destitute. If I had, I would have run up irrecoverable costs, which I would have had to meet when he declared himself bankrupt once again, having been a bankrupt as recently as 1991.

The Representation of the People Act 1983 is relevant, because section 106 makes it a criminal offence to tell lies about the character or conduct of a candidate with a view to affecting his return to Parliament. I was able to confront the editor of the internet site at a public meeting to get him to admit that he was making these statements about my character and conduct to damage my vote, and I then reported him to the police under the terms of section 106.

That led to a trial in December 1998 in a magistrates court. After three days of cross-examination of myself, and a series of smears and lies put forward on behalf of the person on trial by Mr. Paul Bogan, his barrister, Mr. Bogan admitted on the last day of the trial:

"I accept that there is no evidence of a direct nature that Dr. Lewis was homosexual."

In fact, Mr. Bogan produced no shred of evidence of any sort, nor was a single witness produced.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I would be grateful if the hon. Member could help me by demonstrating how his remarks are related to the Bill before us.

Dr. Lewis: I am obliged, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was encouraged by the meeting that I had with the Minister this morning and I was told that it would be germane to talk about this case with a view to tabling an amendment in Committee to close the loophole that I am about to explain. I have almost finished my remarks on the illustration, and, if you bear with me a few moments longer, you will see that it is entirely germane.

In the December trial, this gentleman was convicted on seven criminal counts. However, on appeal in the Crown court in June this year, those convictions were quashed. They were quashed because the material had been uploaded on to the internet before the opening of the election campaign, and thus while I was a prospective parliamentary candidate, not an adopted parliamentary candidate. The Press Association law reporter quoted the judgment as follows:

"the judge said: 'Failure of the defendant to act to shut down the internet site cannot be properly described as publication in the context of this Act.'

He went on"—

here is the direct relevance of the case, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

"'We are aware that our decision means that there is a situation which is unsatisfactory if Section 106 (of the Act) is to continue to be effective legislation.

We are not entitled to remedy any defect the wording of the section may have in light of more modern conditions.'"

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point in the context of this Bill and much other legislation. Will he explain why, given the logic that he is pursuing, he thought it appropriate to vote last night against the Electronic Communications Bill, which contains provisions that will help to address some of the points that he has raised?

Dr. Lewis: I was not aware that that Bill contained such provisions—I wish to be entirely honest with the hon. Gentleman. Had I been aware of them, I would have reconsidered the matter.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend's memory, which is normally very good, has failed on this occasion. He did not vote against the Bill; he abstained.

Dr. Lewis: Much as I appreciate my hon. Friend's attempt to assist me, I am aware of the passage of time and the importance of letting other Members speak, and we are moving into arcane considerations in which I have no wish to indulge.

The judgment made it clear that section 106 of the 1983 Act is deficient. As a result of the creation of the internet, people can upload lies about a candidate in an election, but, provided that they do so prior to the start of the election campaign, failure to shut down the website in question is not enough to establish that publication occurred during the election campaign itself, and thus to establish guilt under section 106.

I understand from the Minister that he has experienced something slightly similar to my case, although the allegations against him were of a different nature. Our cases show that section 106 of the 1983 Act is now worthless in respect of protecting candidates for election against deliberate lies told about their personal lives and character with the intention of damaging their chances of returning to Parliament.

I therefore hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will join me in seeking to support an amendment that I propose to table in Committee to restore to candidates the protection against lying filth and the disgraceful attempts to pervert the political process which section 106 was originally intended to prevent. Now that we are in the age of the internet, I am sure that such protection will be of value to all candidates of all parties in all future parliamentary elections.

9.12 pm

Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan): I am aware of the time constraints, so I shall limit my comments to two or, if time allows, three items. Most of the points that I would want to make have been made much more eloquently by previous speakers.

My first point relates to clause 13, which deals with people with disabilities. Obviously, I welcome any measure that will ensure that disabled people have the right to vote and are more easily able to vote than at the moment. However, the Bill makes the process an awful lot more bureaucratic than is necessary, and I hope that we will consider that clause in Committee and try to remove some of the bureaucracy.

Most of us who want to vote can go to the polling station, give our name and address or hand in our polling card, get our ballot paper and cast our vote. Surely we should seek the same provision for disabled people, with the addition only of provision for a helper. We should be

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able to do without the bureaucratic nonsense of requiring disabled people to identify that helper and have his or her name recorded.

My second point concerns voter apathy and fatigue, which has been mentioned by other hon. Members but which is not dealt with in the Bill. It may not be appropriate for it to be covered, and I look to the Minister to say whether or not that is the case. It seems a shame that we might miss the opportunity to try to overcome the voter apathy and fatigue that occur when there are several elections in quick succession.

In the elections in June this year, one reason people gave us for not voting was that they had just voted in May and were being asked to do so again soon afterwards. We should take this opportunity to give the Home Secretary the right in future years to hold two elections on the same day. Surely that would overcome much of the apathy and fatigue and increase the turnout.

Wigan, unfortunately, has a record of low turnout. In May, the local council carried out a survey among voters. We gave those who were carrying out the survey the marked register, so that they knew who had voted and who had not, and they carried out face-to-face interviews on that basis. We got a far more accurate reflection of people's views in that way.

One of the questions asked was how voting turnout could be improved. It is interesting to note that the three main suggestions were not measures that Parliament or local councils could put into effect, but steps that political parties and candidates could take. They included issues such as doorstep canvassing and greater information about candidates. Of the measures suggested which the Bill addresses, the first was postal voting, so I welcome the introduction of postal votes being granted on demand.

The second suggestion was the introduction of electronic voting, both from home and from other sites such as libraries. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will take account of the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Ms Ward). Perhaps the organisations that operate the means of electronic voting might be persuaded to cover the cost of pilot schemes. If they do not volunteer to do so, I hope that my right hon. Friend will provide funding to enable the experiments to be carried out. It strikes me that my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) made a good case for maximising the use of such schemes.

I welcome the Bill, and I look forward to tabling amendments during the Committee stage to address the concerns I have expressed.

9.16 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Like many other right hon. and hon. Members, I welcome the broad thrust of the legislation. However, like my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), I believe that the Bill might well be a wolf in sheep's clothing. Like so many other new Labour Bills, it is a blank cheque, with much detail left out and many powers left in to enable the Home Secretary to make changes through secondary legislation. That is dangerous, not only for the parties concerned but for democracy in this country.

Nevertheless, the debate has highlighted some interesting issues. With his characteristic enthusiasm for high technology, the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) spoke of the use of the internet. That might well prove to be an effective means of preventing multiple declarations. Like all of us, the Home Secretary wants people to be able to get on the register far more easily than they currently can. That is especially important in the light of increased mobility of labour and of households, with 10 per cent. of the population moving each year.

As I pointed out, if that mobility means that there might be a need for as many as 4 million changes to the electoral register each year, the register must be accurate. So my first point, which is meant to be constructive, is that, despite what civil libertarians might say, it might be no bad thing to keep a central, national register. I suspect that that accords with the views of the hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes).

There is a possibility that voting via the internet will be allowed. Given that it would be possible to vote from any site, not only within the UK, but anywhere in the world where there is internet access, steps would have to be taken to prevent personation. That can be achieved: if Amazon.com can ensure that no credit card fraud occurs in its book sales, I am sure that it is not beyond the Government's wit to prevent electoral personation. Certainly, voting off a national register could be arranged to ensure that a second vote could not be made.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) mentioned the difficulties he has encountered with websites. I, too, would like to draw a problem to the Minister's attention. There is no provision in the Bill that would deal with it and the hon. Gentleman might like to think about it. Many hon. Members on both sides of the House have websites, which might use "MP" in the target or uniform resource locator address. It is not easy to change the name of a URL. Technically it could be argued that by retaining "MP" during a general election, when Parliament has been dissolved, one is in breach of the Representation of the People Act. It is a problem that needs to be addressed.

If the right hon. Member for Gorton gets his way and ensures that anyone living abroad for more than five years is disfranchised, that would be mean and dishonest. The Government have reduced pension values by up to 20 per cent. by their raid on pension funds. Many people abroad have pensions in the United Kingdom, and while they may not be paying taxes in this country, they have investments here. Being British citizens, they have every right to ensure that they have a vote. Labour Members may feel that those people will vote Conservative, aware as they are that the raid on pension funds is a grave disincentive to their ever voting for new Labour.

9.21 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition on the Second Reading of an important constitutional Bill. I suspect that we have all declared an interest because we are all interested in the increased participation of our electorates—especially when they vote for us.

I thank the Minister for making it clear that consideration of the Bill in Committee will be held on the Floor of the House. That is vital. I am extremely grateful that we shall all have an opportunity to participate in Committee.

I believe that the Bill was born of good intentions, but there are deep flaws in it. Like many of my colleagues, I am deeply concerned at the lack of public consultation following the findings and recommendations of the working group on electoral procedure. I am aware that the Government are keen to get the Bill through Parliament at breakneck speed—never mind the quality, just feel the speed. However, I urge caution on them. It is a far-reaching Bill with sweeping powers for the Home Secretary that could change the way elections are held, with minimal participation of the House once the Bill becomes an Act. The powers are excessive and I believe that they must be trimmed in the name of good government.

The need for a Bill is unquestioned but the need for this Bill is questionable. I shall not damn the entire Bill because it does not deserve that. There is much within it that deserves credit, and I shall refer to some of those features. I hope also that my criticisms will be constructive.

No one doubts the need to increase participation rates at elections, from general to local and, of course, European. There are many reasons why turnouts at elections are declining. My hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) said that there is a low level of interest at some elections, and that is right. One of my constituents said that she did not vote in a local government election because she felt that when the councillors turned down a planning application, which went to appeal, with an inspector coming from Bristol and overturning the local councillors' decision, that was a denial of democracy. She felt that it was not worth voting in local elections. That is an example of a feeling that we must address.

There are many reasons why the turnout at local elections is pitifully low, at 40 per cent., while in Germany, for example, it is 72 per cent. The turnout at the European elections was absolutely dismal, declining from 36 per cent. to 23.3 per cent., compared with 64 per cent. in Spain. We are definitely at the bottom of the European league table for turnouts at European elections. Indeed, the turnouts at such elections are falling faster than the value of the euro, and that is really saying something. If the turnout declines much further, it will be only the close friends and relatives of the candidates who will be taking part in the elections. I suspect that the registration of the homeless and continuous registration will do nothing to halt the decline of voting in European elections. The system of voting was decrepit, as we told the Government, and the turnout has convinced us that that was the case. There is a crisis of democracy in European elections in Britain which must be addressed forthwith.

In general elections, the decline is smaller but still worrying. It is as though the graffiti generation had said, "Don't vote for the politicians—it only encourages them." We must tackle the problem.

Having accepted the need for considered change, I shall comment on the topics raised in the debate, which in the main has been constructive. Several of the hon. Members present contributed to the debate. The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) spoke about the new technology that can be used to promote voting. It cannot be introduced immediately, but perhaps some can be tested in the pilots. I understand that some new technology is being examined in consultation with British Telecom.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) spoke about the rolling register and proposed an annual reminder. I agree that a national campaign is needed to encourage people to register at certain times during the year. He also referred to clause 9, as did several hon. Members, and the sale of the commercial register. I hope that the Government will give careful consideration to the problems that that raises.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) dealt with several aspects of the Bill. All hon. Members welcome the provisions on disability, which ensure that disabled people can go to a polling station and vote in person. It is important for them to be able to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) spoke passionately about the last time her late mother went to vote and almost had to be carried into the polling station. That is wrong. We must review access to our polling stations, and perhaps hold discussions with Scope, the Royal National Institute for the Blind and other charities that act on behalf of disabled people. They can give advice to the Government, and we must take it on board.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale spoke about early voting and the fact that the Bill seems to contain no limits on when early voting can take place. He also spoke about exit polls and the possibility that exit polls taken after early voting could influence the outcome of the election.

The reduction of the 20-year period during which people resident overseas can vote in the UK could be called the Ashcroft amendment. Let us be adult about the matter. It has been mentioned in whispers from the Government Benches, but it is important. I remember that during the last general election campaign, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) paraded herself round the beaches of Spain, trying to get people to vote for the Labour party. No doubt we, too, had hon. Members trying to encourage overseas voters to vote for us. We should not penalise the 3 million people who can vote as overseas electors simply because the Government have a vendetta against one person.

Ms Ward: Does not the hon. Gentleman realise that this is not about one individual, although it will have an impact on that individual? Does he not realise that people who live abroad for as long as 20 years are not voting for a future with which they have some connection? They are voting because they have a past with Britain. It is important that people who vote for a Government live under the policies of that Government, not in another country where they are not affected by the consequences of their vote.

Mr. Evans: I wholly disagree with the hon. Lady. Many of those people have a deep interest in the United Kingdom. They have pensions from businesses, and they pay tax on their pensions; they have houses and they may pay property taxes; and they may have intentions of coming back to the UK.

[Mr. Evans]

This is not the Bill in which to introduce the change that the Government propose. Like the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, I believe that we should reflect further on the change. It seems to have been introduced in the heat of the moment, while attention is concentrated on one person. I do not believe that that is the Home Secretary's intention. We should therefore reflect further.

The hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) mentioned assistance for local authorities participating in the pilot schemes. That is important so that local authorities are not deterred, especially from going down the more expensive electronic routes.

The hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) made a witty contribution as usual. I was not in the Chamber, but I understand that his speech was funny. The hon. Gentleman is the one pound that the Conservatives are not keen to save at the next election. He was right about clause 9: the Government must think again.

The hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) made many important suggestions, especially the proposal on dual registration. Perhaps we should reconsider that during the Bill's passage, and provide for people who are registered in a couple of places to specify where they intend to vote in a general election.

I cannot believe that residents in old people's homes found it difficult to recognise my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). I am sure that they all know him, and look forward to his frequent visits. My hon. Friend made an important point about security and the electoral register. For many reasons, some people do not want their names published. Jill Dando was mentioned, and we must consider the point seriously. My hon. Friend also asked us to take account of history when we consider changing polling day from Thursday to Saturday and Sunday. Many people go on weekend breaks and perhaps would not be back to vote on Saturday and Sunday. Thus despite holding the election on two days, the turnout could be lower.

The hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) criticised us for intending to delay the Bill. We want to improve, not delay the measure. She talked about the rolling register, which I welcome. We could all give examples of people who just missed registering and find it difficult to vote. The hon. Lady also spoke passionately about the disabled.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) mentioned his anxieties about the pilot schemes. I share his worries that, once the pilot schemes have been undertaken, the Bill will give the Home Secretary vast powers. While we accept that the Home Secretary would not abuse them, he may not always be in that position and a Labour Member who is a little more shifty than the current incumbent might take over. We must therefore be careful.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) said that he was disappointed by our approach. I hope that he will accept that we are sincere in our desire to improve the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West emphasised that we must encourage the electorate's interest in voting. We must ensure not only that people register but that they want to vote.

The hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who is well known for his work on trying to introduce a rolling register in this country, expressed the hope that it would be a proper rolling register, and not simply covered with a veneer of modernity. We all agree with that. He also spoke passionately about his wish for disabled people to have the opportunity to vote in person at polling stations. We all support that. However, if we are to introduce early voting and one polling station where people can turn up to even out the numbers, we must ensure that the system is secure and that people cannot double vote.

Mr. Barnes: I am pleased that the Opposition are in favour of disabled access to polling stations. When that policy was pursued in the previous Parliament, the Leader of the Opposition helped to block the measure when he was a junior Minister at the Department of Social Security.

Mr. Evans: As ever, we are a listening and caring Opposition on our journey to government. We want to ensure that the changes are secure. We do not want to make it easy for people to double vote and defraud the system. That deep anxiety was reflected in the Select Committee on Home Affairs and in the working party.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) talked about section 106 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 and told a personal story. He was brave to speak about the trauma that he went through, and I wish him well in tabling amendments to the Bill that will assist him and others who may suffer.

The hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) talked about disabilities and the potential for using new technology to improve access to the vote. He is absolutely right about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) talked about using the internet for voting—I suspect that few Members of the House know more about it than he does—and the problems with using the initials "MP" after our names on the internet. If we do so, we could fall foul of all sorts of difficulties.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent summing up. Will he reflect on overseas voting? Does he agree that many people work overseas for perhaps 20, 30 or 40 years and that their numbers are increasing? Although the hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) seems to think that such people live abroad permanently, they often return to this country, are part of it, pay taxes in it, have children and grandchildren in it and should be entitled to vote.

Mr. Evans: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Bill seems to have been born of a vendetta against one person, but 3 million people who live overseas can vote in elections.

For goodness' sake, the Bill is supposed to increase the number of people who participate in elections, but Labour Members are threatening to table an amendment that could decrease that number. *[Interruption.]* If Labour Members want to be honest about this, they should put Michael Ashcroft's name in the Bill and not deny 3 million others the opportunity to vote.

I believe that the fault lines that run deep through the Bill will have undemocratic consequences, although I do not say that that is intentional. It is intended to increase

voter participation, but an amendment may be tabled that could reduce the electorate by 3 million. The upside is that the domestic electorate will be increased, but by only a fraction of that number. The chances of multiple voting will be increased with the introduction of the travelling voter; not the homeless, but the shameless, will abuse the system and they will move their votes not out of necessity, but out of opportunity. Tactical voting will be replaced by tactical registration, which will give a fresh lease of life to the old Irish maxim, "Vote early, vote often."

We want the currently enfranchised to vote more often and the disabled to be given the opportunity to play their own full and personal role in all elections.

Ms Ward: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: I do not have time.

We want the electorate to be reconnected to the British democratic system, which has been battered and vandalised by the Labour Government during their internal election farces—in Wales over who would lead the Welsh Assembly and in London over the mayoralty—and their external electoral farces, such as those related to the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999. We want to achieve a more modern and efficient way of voting that maintains the confidence that people have in the system, and we want to make it easier for people to vote. We do not want to make it easier for people to cheat.

Further careful consideration of all the proposals that we have debated this evening is necessary before the Bill goes any further, which is why we have tabled our amendment. The Home Secretary, Ministers and Labour Members all have the same interest as us in giving more people the opportunity to participate fully and freely in all elections in this country, but the Bill contains fault lines. We want them to be put right before it proceeds and, because of the problems that have led to clause 9 being included, we believe that there should have been more consultation with charities and businesses.

We also believe that more consultation should have taken place once the working group had reported. The Government, however, have decided not to consult further, and we understand that they want to pass the Bill quickly so that they can have pilots up and running by May 2000. I ask them again: please do not push the Bill through the House quickly. Let us improve it so that we can all support it. If the Government listen to the House, there will be proper consensus.

9.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The Bill is part of a wider programme of constitutional modernisation and democratic renewal undertaken by the new Labour Government. Our electoral procedure plays a fundamental role in our democracy. It is a tribute to the work done by the modernisers of the 19th century that their legacy in electoral law has stood the test of time. At the end of this century, it still carries much legitimacy and respect.

However, some areas need updating, and the Howarth working party recommendations will bring the procedures out of the 19th and into the 21st century. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) as chairman of the working party, and to my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) whose work on rolling registers is a source of these proposals. In his contribution to the debate, he set out further ambitious proposals. I am not sure that we can go as far as he wants in all respects, but he will play a substantial part in the consideration of the Bill and will no doubt have more innovative ideas. He made a telling point about the Leader of the Opposition's conversion to helping the disabled to vote. The right hon. Gentleman has now realised that my hon. Friend's ideas were common sense all along.

As I said, there is much in our electoral law of which we can be proud. We were one of the first countries to legislate to provide a free and fair electoral system, secret ballots, limits on election expenditure, a ban on "treating" and much else. None of us would contemplate removing any of those provisions. That said, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) pointed out, our procedures are far from perfect. Indeed, it is arguably the very success and stability of our democracy that has made us slow to update our electoral procedures to take account of changes in modern society. We recognise, as did the working party, that the foundations of our parliamentary procedures are strong, but the legislation that is built on those foundations must be up to date so as to maintain legitimacy in the years ahead.

I hope that the Bill will address the concerns about low turnout that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and I share. The legislative changes to registration and absent voting, and the enabling of local authorities to run pilot schemes to try out innovative electoral procedures, will give all of us a dramatic and long-term opportunity to improve the way in which our elections are run.

I want to deal with some of the specific points raised in the debate, and come first to the extraordinary opening speech of the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway). It was symbolic of where the Conservative party stands today. The Bill merely implements the recommendations of the Howarth working party, on which members of the Conservative party sat. It broadly agrees with the proposals of Conservative and other members of the Select Committee on Home Affairs. It is a straightforward Bill, but we are told that it is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Such a comment is symbolic of the Tory party as we know it today—and increasingly over recent weeks—because it shows rampant paranoia.

Talking of savage sheep, the claim made by the hon. Member for Ryedale that this sheep has wolf's teeth rests on a number of arguments. Let us see how sharp these teeth really are. He said that there was no regulatory impact assessment and the Government were therefore trying to sneak the Bill through without one. Did he check with the Library? Did he not know that a regulatory impact assessment has been available in the usual way since 18 November? He did not need to ask the Prime Minister whether it was available, he just needed to check. I am assured that the regulatory impact assessment was hand delivered to the Library, and is there if he wishes to read it. His point did not have much bite to it.

Mr. Greenway: With all due respect to the hon. Gentleman, will he explain why, before the debate started, my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) received a response from the Prime Minister saying that he would reply to my hon. Friend in due

[Mr. Greenway]

course, but it was only after I had left the Chamber at 6.30 pm that the Minister's written answer to me was available on the letter board?

Mr. O'Brien: If the hon. Gentleman had done the normal thing and checked with the Library, as other Members feel able to do, he would have found that the regulatory impact assessment is there, and that his claim that we are trying to sneak something past the House is entirely illegitimate.

The hon. Gentleman also claimed that the pilot schemes were originally supposed to be only for local elections, but are now intended for parliamentary elections. Let us be clear about this—the pilot schemes will be involved only in local elections, and only after an affirmative resolution of the House can particular procedures be extended to parliamentary elections. That means that there would be further debate and a further vote in the House before that happened.

We do not intend to proceed unilaterally. The legitimacy of our electoral procedures depends on agreement between the major parties that the voting procedure is valid, and we would want broad support before changing it. We certainly would not want to try to push things through in an illegitimate way. We have been clear about that all along. The hon. Gentleman's claim has no teeth.

Mr. Greenway: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman one last time.

Mr. Greenway: I shall not intervene again, but what the Minister is saying appears to be extremely important. Is he saying that, whatever the experience of the pilot schemes, which, if the Bill is passed, will be launched in May, and notwithstanding the powers that the Home Secretary is taking in clause 11—powers which go far beyond anything that the working party proposed, and which certainly were not contained in its recommendations published in July—the Government will extend the pilot schemes to the general election only if there is consensus among all parties in the House?

Mr. O'Brien: We have said that we will act according to consensus wherever possible. We have made it clear that these are powers not for the Home Secretary, but for the House of Commons: they are powers enabling the House of Commons to make a decision to vote on an issue by affirmative resolution. The hon. Gentleman's claims that we are somehow trying to push things through have no legitimacy.

The hon. Gentleman's third argument was that we were trying to legislate to alter the period applying to overseas voters. By the time that the hon. Gentleman began his speech, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary had already said that we did not intend to try to do that in the Bill, but the hon. Gentleman had written his speech before the event and proceeded at length to tell us why we should not do something that we were not intending to do in any case.

Mr. Miller: I think that I have discovered why the Conservative party has become so interested in this matter. The draft register relating to my constituency, which was sent to me today, revealed that a lady had said that she would be registering in France next year. She is a Mrs. Lynn Turnbull, who turns out to have been my Conservative opponent at the last election. Are all the Tories going to register abroad? If so, perhaps the Home Secretary will act quickly and sort the matter out for good.

Mr. O'Brien: We wait to see more of the wonders that we have beheld in recent days in the Conservative party.

The next claim made by the hon. Member for Ryedale was that there had been no consultation. I will not go into all the consultation that there has been, such as the consultation over two years with local authorities and electoral registration officers through the working party, and in which the Conservatives were fully involved. I will not go into the details of the interim report and the public response to it, or the details of the 1999 report and the public response to that. I will not go into the fact that all the commercial companies that deal with the registers participated in a consultation document, or the fact that the Home Affairs Select Committee took public evidence in which the Conservative party was involved. All that happened, yet the hon. Gentleman claimed that there was no consultation. I bet he wishes that there was that amount of consultation on every Bill.

The hon. Gentleman commented on how awful it was that the Government did not appear to be considering taking the Committee stage on the Floor of the House. If his hon. Friends had told him, he would have known that it was agreed before the Bill came before us that the Committee stage would be taken on the Floor. I do not want to be paranoid—perhaps his hon. Friends did not tell him. He may have to take that up with them, in today's Conservative party.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman that, far from being a wolf in sheep's clothing, the Bill is what it appears to be. If he wants to call it a sheep, it is a sheep in sheep's clothing. It is a straightforward Bill, involving no mendacity. I hope that we can now proceed as we should, by way of debate and agreement.

I want to deal with one important issue that has arisen throughout the debate—the sale of the register. The hon. Members for Ryedale and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) and others all raised that issue. They are concerned about social exclusion as a result of the sale of an edited register.

It is important to point out that the register will still be available to commercial companies, but that it will be edited to allow people the choice not to be on the register. Electoral returning officers have made it clear that they get more complaints about names being sold to commercial companies than anything else.

The working party decided that it was a matter of principle that people should not be under a statutory duty to provide personal information about their names and whereabouts when they had no say in whether that information should be sold or used for purposes that were different from those that they had agreed. It said that they would have no choice in that and that that was wrong.

We have already heard of examples of abused spouses or those who do not want junk mail. People are concerned that a CD-ROM containing all the election registers in the country can be offered free on the front of a computer

magazine. If you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, want to find out where anyone lives, it is possible, with some of the new computers, quickly to identify that person's address. Such information can be offered free on the front of a magazine without the consent of those who have given that information under a statutory duty. A fundamental principle is involved—people should not be forced into that situation.

As I have said, social exclusion is a serious issue. The argument that people who are poor may be denied credit because they have opted out of the commercially available register needs to be dealt with. The Bill will make it easier for those who change address frequently to register at a new address. Therefore, in some ways, if they are potentially socially excluded they will have a better chance under the Bill of getting on a register and gaining access to credit. That would be an improvement.

Everyone should be given the right to make a choice, but the important thing is that it should be an informed choice. If they choose to tick the box—it will be their choice; they will have to make the decision—to exclude themselves from the edited register that is sold on, they should do it in an informed way.

We are discussing with the industry funding for a leaflet that would be agreed with us. We should remember that none of it will happen before an affirmative resolution is brought before the House, so there is plenty of opportunity to continue the discussions. The industry has suggested that it may be willing to provide that funding. The leaflet could go out with all electoral application forms, so that people would know what they were doing when they decided to tick that box. They would know that it might affect their credit rating and they would be informed of a number of other issues of which they need to be aware.

If we can reach agreement on that leaflet—I see no reason why we should not—that will give people the opportunity to make an informed choice. Whether people are potentially socially excluded or otherwise, they should have the right to that choice. It should be an informed choice. The ability to opt out of the register, rather than to opt in, should be available to everyone.

We can look at all those issues in detail in Committee. There may be a way in which we can move forward. We do not have to do it during consideration of the Bill; we may be able to do it in later discussions. There may be a way to allow people to put their names on the edited register later. They may choose to make their names available later—having previously thought that they would not need access to credit—if they need access to credit and therefore wish to be included in the edited register. We can consider those issues in the coming months, discuss them with the industry and see how we can take them forward without compromising the fundamental principle.

Mr. Evans: The Minister will be aware that sometimes only the head of the household fills in the form. That person could tick the box on behalf of an entire household without some of them knowing that their credit status had been removed on their behalf.

Mr. O'Brien: That can already happen. We are considering the issues with the industry and looking at how to take them forward. We do not need to compromise the fundamental principle or cause the damage that some in the industry seem to think may be caused.

Many issues have been raised during the debate. I shall not be able to respond to all Members who have spoken, but I hope to write to those with whose points I do not deal. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said in his trenchant speech that he wanted more opportunities for telephone voting. We can consider a pilot—it might be possible for some voters, particularly the blind. We shall have an opportunity to consider such options and how to move forward on electronic voting. He also asked for the deadline for absent voters to be reduced. The working party considered that, but concluded, on the strong advice of the electoral administrators, that it was not currently practicable. The proposal to allow postal votes on demand should enable many more people who want to vote by post to do so.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) expressed concern about the affirmative resolution procedure. Perhaps we can discuss that at length in Committee. We are talking only about moving forward on a successful, evaluated, confirmed and broadly supported pilot scheme that would amend, to an extent, the way in which we might vote. We intend to move forward with broad support when possible. An affirmative resolution on the Floor of the House will be needed. If such detailed issues were contained in a Bill, they might end up being dealt with in Committee. It is better that they should be dealt with on the Floor of the House. The extensions of procedural ability to vote are marginal and are not likely to be widely opposed. I should like to have time to deal with other points raised by the hon. Gentleman and by the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing), but I am sure that they will forgive me for not doing so.

By modernising electoral procedures, we shall make it easier and more convenient for people to vote and to exercise their rights in a democracy. In renewing our democracy, it is important that we reflect modern life styles and behaviour. That is essential if we are to gain the interest of young people in the democratic process and encourage the participation of everybody in our elections. Democracy is nothing if people do not exercise their ability to vote. The Bill is about ensuring that people get the opportunity to vote.

It is small consolation in many democracies that fewer people are voting. That trend is evident not just here, but across the western world. The Bill will help to give access to the ballot to the disabled, the armed services, the elderly, the young and many others. The Howarth working party on electoral procedures was a non-partisan attempt to address the issues and create greater opportunities for democratic participation. It sought to proceed by consensus and it involved all parties. I want the whole House to be able to support the Bill. I ask the Conservatives not to press their reasoned amendment to a vote and I ask the House to support the Bill.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 143, Noes 332.

Division No. 6] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian

Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Cash, William
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Horam, John
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wintarton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Eleanor Laing and
Mrs. Jacqui Lait.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack
(Copeland)
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie
(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*

Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mallon, Seamus
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Clelland and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time,

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills),

That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

Committee tomorrow.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE BILL
[*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Representation of the People Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums which under any other Act are payable out of money so provided;

(2) the payment out of the Consolidated Fund of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums which under any other Act are payable out of that Fund.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

Northern Ireland

10.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): I beg to move,

That the draft Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Appointed Day) Order 1999, a copy of which was laid before this House on 29 November, be approved.

This is one of the most welcome pieces of legislation that any of us will be asked to enact this Session—indeed, in the whole Parliament.

It is a momentous occasion for Northern Ireland. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Secretary of State, but I must have a greater degree of quiet in the House. This is a very important occasion. Those hon. Members who are here for the debate should give the Secretary of State a good hearing.

Mr. Mandelson: This is indeed a momentous occasion, as Northern Ireland begins to put behind it the conflict, prejudice and division that has blighted the lives of everyone in both communities for a generation.

For the first time, all shades of political opinion in Northern Ireland will have a stake in the future. After a quarter of a century, the curtain is finally coming down on direct rule. Of course, there will still be anger about the past, and real difficulties undoubtedly still lie ahead, but this generation is now turning the page to the future.

In Stormont now, Ministers have been appointed and a Government formed. They are waiting only for their powers. Passing those powers to them is our job tonight.

To the new Northern Ireland Executive—five Unionists and five Nationalists—we are transferring responsibility for enterprise; trade; culture and the environment; higher education; training; agriculture and rural development; schools, health, social services and public safety; social and regional development; and finance and personnel.

This is not mere symbolism. It is the passing of real, practical power into the hands of parties drawn from both communities, to democratically elected and accountable people who will no longer have a Secretary of State and his officials to blame when things go wrong.

What has been created is so strong and so durable that not even the Democratic Unionist party of the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) wants to stay out of it. I am glad to say that that party has entered the Executive with two very capable Ministers.

At last, the Good Friday agreement is being implemented.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the Secretary of State say whether the Democratic Unionist Ministers will be at the meeting of the Executive on Thursday?

Mr. Mandelson: That is a question that the hon. Gentleman might put to the Democratic Unionist Members, who are in the House tonight. I have every confidence that they will play a full part in the work and life of the Executive.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Come on, then.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I suggest that the Secretary of State continue.

Mr. Mandelson: I thought for a moment that I was going to have to give way again.

As I said, at last the Good Friday agreement is being implemented. I can state that, under the terms of section 3 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, sufficient progress has been made in implementing the agreement for me to set a commencement date for devolution to take effect in Northern Ireland.

If the order is approved tonight, I can tell the House that Her Majesty has agreed to hold a special Privy Council meeting tomorrow, when the order may be made.

The order states that devolution for Northern Ireland will take effect from midnight tomorrow. In addition, from this Thursday, direct rule will be no more.

In addition to the 10 new Departments created by a previous order, the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister will also be responsible for the promotion and protection of equality issues, and for human rights as well as economic policy.

Some areas of responsibility will remain under my authority, notably policing, security and criminal justice, and that is right and proper for the time being.

The security situation has been transformed as a result of politics replacing violence as Northern Ireland's way of life. However, vigilance remains necessary and we will remain on our guard until it is safe to do otherwise. In the exercise of my authority in those important residual areas, I will consult the Assembly whenever proper and appropriate to ensure that local concerns and issues are taken into consideration in relation to the exercise of my responsibilities. The institutional changes foreshadowed in the Good Friday agreement are not limited to the new Executive.

If the order is approved, in two days' time the new British-Irish agreement will come into effect following the exchange of notifications between the two Governments. This replaces the former 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement and will mark the beginning of a new understanding between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. It will trigger the establishment of the six north-south bodies—including the North-South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council, and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference—and it will provide a foundation for practical cross-border co-operation.

The Irish Government will immediately make a declaration that will bring into effect the amendments to articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution and our own amendments relating to the law on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland will also come into force.

This settles, once and for all, the constitutional argument that has been at the root of the conflict. Henceforward, Northern Ireland's future will be decided by consent of its own people. Unionist and nationalist

aspirations will have equal legitimacy, but only so long as they are peacefully and democratically expressed and pursued.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): Will the Secretary of State be reminded that Unionism is not an aspiration? It is a possession, whereas nationalism is an aspiration.

Mr. Mandelson: I am sure that the House will have heard and noted what the hon. Gentleman has said.

Together, the steps that I have described begin a new era for Northern Ireland, which it behoves all hon. Members to welcome in the House tonight.

I should like to pay particular tribute to the Northern Ireland civil service, which has worked enormously hard to put in place the arrangements for devolution at remarkably short notice—not merely the administrative steps needed to create 11 Departments from six and to get ready all the other institutions under the agreement, but also the physical reorganisation, the movement of staff, the preparation of buildings, the reorganisation of telephone and computer networks and so on.

To take just one example, the corridor outside my office has for the past 36 hours reverberated to the sound of trolleys piled with desks, chairs, lamp stands and countless other items as the bureaucracy demonstrates its unique mobility and marches off to serve a new Administration. I welcome this—I am losing some excellent advisers, but I know that they will serve their new Ministers with the same dedication and integrity with which they supported me and my predecessors.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): While the right hon. Gentleman is recognising the work that is being done, will he also recognise that tonight is possible only because of the dedicated work of the Northern Ireland civil service and so many others for so many years, during which they kept administration going in difficult circumstances and made it possible for this much more hopeful day to dawn?

Mr. Mandelson: The right hon. Gentleman knows that what he has said is only too true. Others in the House, including other right hon. Gentlemen who have served in a similar capacity, will testify to the excellent service that the civil service has given.

The civil service will be among the first to say that local politicians should be in charge of local affairs. Little trust has previously existed among those politicians, but in London and Belfast, in offices, corridors, canteens and the odd ambassador's residence, the story of this week's breakthrough is that trust crept in and partnership grew throughout those important contacts during the 11 weeks of the Mitchell review.

It is invidious to single out one person for credit as so many have played their part, but George Mitchell refused to believe that Northern Ireland's plight was hopeless. His patience, tireless spirit and determination have been indispensable. The leaders of the pro-agreement parties have indeed repaid his faith handsomely.

I congratulate also the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) on his election as Northern Ireland's First Minister. On Saturday, he proved that he has instilled in his party the personal courage that he has shown throughout the whole process. Northern Ireland will indeed need strong, assured leadership in the early days of self-rule. There can be no one better qualified than the right hon. Gentleman to take the helm.

A power-sharing Government for Northern Ireland has been a long-cherished goal for the party of the Deputy First Minister, the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon). His status, endorsed by Assembly Members yesterday, is a fitting reward for his contribution to realising that goal. His presence reassures us that this new Government will prize fairness and tolerance. His party leader, the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), has long championed parity of esteem for both traditions in Northern Ireland, and on Thursday that will become reality.

I would also like to pay tribute to Gerry Adams. He has brought Sinn Fein in from the cold. Without sacrificing his or its basic beliefs, he has created a party with which Unionists can do business, as the sight of Martin McGuinness—to some a remarkable sight—on his first day as Minister for Education goes to show.

I cannot let this moment pass without saying that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have each put extraordinary time and effort into finding a solution in Northern Ireland—as did their predecessors, notably the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). They are the architects of the Good Friday agreement, and can justifiably be proud of their achievement. The same is true of my predecessor as Secretary of State, now the Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam), whose endless patience saw the process through countless difficult times—as did our predecessors through the long years of direct rule.

There is one final piece to the jigsaw that will bring the twin goals of devolution and decommissioning to Northern Ireland. The IRA has confirmed that, within hours of the transfer of powers, it will appoint an authorised representative to deal directly with General de Chastelain's decommissioning commission; I hope that the other paramilitary organisations will also do so. That is the first step on the road to the decommissioning of arms in Northern Ireland.

No one is being asked to leap in the dark. General de Chastelain will give a full, frank and public account of the decommissioning process. He is respected on all sides, and his integrity is beyond doubt. I have no doubt that he will ensure that the commission will achieve its mandate. We are not planning for failure, but, as I told the House last week, swift action will follow if there is clear default at any stage of the twin processes of devolution and decommissioning.

Approval of the order will assure new stability, new prosperity and new hope for Northern Ireland. After much frustration and many false starts, we can now unlock the full potential of the Good Friday agreement. The arrangements that will come into force on Thursday will bind the citizens and Government of Northern Ireland closer than they have ever been before. Only the people of Northern Ireland will have the power to decide their future. For all of them, this is the path to an unbreakable peace and to truly democratic and accountable Government.

I commend the order to the House.

10.29 pm

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): I wholly endorse the remarks made by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about Senator George Mitchell. It is no exaggeration to say that we would not be considering the order if it were not for his tireless patience—the patience of a saint. The senator has gained the trust of everyone involved in the process. This country owes him a very great debt.

The Opposition support the order; not least because we have consistently wanted a devolved Administration in Northern Ireland. Many right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House have served honourably in the Northern Ireland Office. I believe that they would all agree that they have been only second best, because it is right and proper that the people of Northern Ireland elect politicians who then can exercise power and responsibility. Successive Governments, Conservative and Labour, have administered Northern Ireland to the very best of their ability, but there has been a democratic deficit. It is unacceptable, in a perfect society, for Northern Ireland to be run exclusively by Northern Ireland Ministers who represent Welsh, Scottish and English constituencies.

That democratic deficit has been further illustrated by the fact that, for perfectly understandable reasons, local government in Northern Ireland, unlike elsewhere in the United Kingdom, has very, very few powers. It is important that the elected representatives, Unionist and nationalist, gain the power and then the responsibility. It will not be easy for them, and in the weeks and months ahead those Ministers will suddenly have to take some very tough decisions, but we wish them well.

The second reason that we support the order is for the reasons outlined by the Secretary of State. The moment that the Executive is formally set up on Thursday, the cross-border bodies come into effect, and, automatically, the Irish constitution is amended. Articles 2 and 3, which for too long have been a stumbling block to lasting peace in Northern Ireland and have caused huge misunderstandings, will disappear, and the Irish Government—the people of Ireland—will no longer have a constitutional claim on the Province. Instead—rightly, in a democracy—the people of Northern Ireland, exclusively and entirely, will be able to decide the future of that Province. I applaud that; it is a major step forward.

There is something that we have always wanted in addition to devolution, and that is the end to violence for good, and the decommissioning of all illegally held arms and explosives. We have been bitterly disappointed and very frustrated that not one gun, nor one ounce of Semtex, has been handed in by any of the paramilitaries, loyalist or republican, who signed up to the Belfast agreement. They have failed to fulfil their obligations, and previously the House has heard me say that I believe that it was wrong to release 300 or more loyalist and republican terrorist prisoners back on to the streets without getting anything whatever in return.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): The Secretary of State has said that he will not plan for failure. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the failure to have a plan B—the failure to have a plan for failure—has given the terrorists a powerful negotiating hand, which has enabled them to get away without handing in any weapons?

Mr. MacKay: The House will have heard the Secretary of State say tonight, clearly and without equivocation, that if anyone defaults on the Mitchell review proposals, they will be penalised. I take the Secretary of State at his word, but he knows full well that the House will be watching events carefully. Like him, I do not wish to contemplate failure, but we must be aware that we do not live in a perfect world. If decommissioning does not take place reasonably quickly, action will need to be taken.

I believe that the House should endorse what the Secretary of State said about the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and congratulate him on being elected First Minister, as we congratulate the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) on becoming Deputy First Minister, and wish them both well for the future.

I should like to return, for a second, to the role of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann. I entirely endorse what he said at his party's council meeting on Saturday. It seems to me quite reasonable and proper that the Ulster Unionist council should be reconvened early in February to review progress. It is absolutely clear that if decommissioning has not properly commenced by that point, it would be wrong and improper for Sinn Fein Ministers to remain on the Executive.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I heard my right hon. Friend endorse the Secretary of State's comments about the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble). I trust that he will not endorse the Secretary of State's comments about Gerry Adams, who ought to be a Member of the House. Will my right hon. Friend consider that many people in Northern Ireland will be very distressed to hear the Secretary of State paying tribute to somebody whose hands are dripping with blood and who is almost certainly a member of the IRA Army Council, which is the cause of all the troubles in Northern Ireland. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Hon. Members should allow me to deal with this point. I will not tolerate interventions that are in fact mini-speeches. They are not the done thing.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is a matter of common courtesy that we always refer to Members of the House, whether or not they have taken the oath, by their constituency. The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) referred to a certain person by name, as indeed did the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the hon. Member for Blaby was not out of order.

Mr. MacKay: I want to look to the future, and I believe that all the parties in Northern Ireland and all the

participants in the review process will be judged, rightly, not only by the statements that they have been making but by their actions. In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), I say that we shall judge Mr. Adams, Mr. McGuinness, Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA by their actions in the weeks and months ahead.

I welcome the fact that it now seems almost certain that the Provisional IRA will appoint a representative to deal with General de Chastelain, and I very much endorse the Secretary of State's remarks that the whole House has absolute confidence in General de Chastelain to produce the right report and reach the right conclusions on the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives. However, you will be aware, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that actually arranging for somebody to discuss those matters with the general is only the first step. Although we welcome that step, shortly thereafter it will be absolutely essential that there is a proper start to the decommissioning of those illegally held arms and explosives, not only by the republicans, but by the so-called loyalist paramilitaries who signed up to the Belfast agreement.

Equally, I believe that it is vital that all arms and explosives are handed in by May. It is very easy to forget, in this short debate, that all those arms and explosives were supposed to be handed in over a two-year period concluding next May. Eighteen months has gone by, and there has been no decommissioning. There ain't long to go.

I want briefly to refer to the appointment of Mr. McGuinness as Education Minister. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] There seem to be complaints from Members on the Government Benches. It is absolutely right that in this House we are able to discuss developments in Northern Ireland. *[Interruption.]* Let me say to hon. Members who groaned and who are now shouting from a sedentary position, including the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett), that there are legitimate, genuine concerns in the Province and elsewhere in the United Kingdom about the fact that Mr. McGuinness, with his background and record, is now responsible for schools in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacKay: I shall conclude my point and then I shall certainly give way to the hon. Gentleman.

If the House is not going to discuss those legitimate concerns, and I, as the shadow Secretary of State, am to be shouted down for raising them, all I can say is that that is not what the House of Commons is about. I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Corbett: My point is simple, but the right hon. Gentleman does not appear to understand it. The appointment in Northern Ireland of Ministers to their portfolios has nothing to do with the House—that is what devolved government is all about.

Mr. MacKay: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I fully understand that, but it does not mean that we cannot comment on the legitimate fears of the people of Northern Ireland and elsewhere. If we are properly to resolve the difficulty—

Mr. Bermingham: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacKay: No, because there is a 10-minute limit on speeches and many right hon. and hon. Members want to speak in the debate.

If we are to make progress in the review process, we have to be aware of the huge upset and legitimate concern arising from Martin McGuinness becoming schools Minister, with responsibility for education in Northern Ireland. I accept that Mr. McGuinness is entitled to be Education Minister. Under the d'Hondt process, the different parties were able to choose the Departments they wanted; Sinn Fein chose education, and I make no complaint about that. However, the fact that there is such legitimate concern about Martin McGuinness running schools in Northern Ireland makes it all the more important that Mr. McGuinness and his—

Mr. Bermingham: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I hope that it is a point of order.

Mr. Bermingham: Does the Opposition spokesman have the right to mislead the House? The matter to which he refers is not one of appointment, but one of choice in a devolved—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) is not misleading the House. He is in good order; had he not been, I would have stopped him. Let me tell the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) that when he raises points of order, he squeezes Back Benchers out of the debate.

Mr. MacKay: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

As I was saying, the House accepts that Mr. McGuinness is legally entitled to be Minister for Education under the d'Hondt formula, which is part of the agreement. However, there is huge concern about him running schools in Northern Ireland. Therefore, along with Mr. Adams, Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA, Mr. McGuinness has a responsibility quickly to commence the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives. In that way, they can prove to us, in action rather than in words, that they are now legitimate democrats who want to play a full role in the Executive running Northern Ireland. If they fail to do that, they and their representatives have no legitimate right to remain as Ministers.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): My right hon. Friend will have noted that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland referred to swift action if decommissioning did not take place within the prescribed time, and he has referred to

[Mr. William Cash]

the question of the action needed in that event. Will he specify what action would be taken if decommissioning did not take place within the set time scale?

Mr. MacKay: That is a matter for the Secretary of State, and he would not necessarily welcome my advice at this point. However, I think it inconceivable that the Executive should continue into February without proper and sustained decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives taking place. Many Ministers who have been appointed to the Executive would not want to remain in post if decommissioning did not take place, and they would have my full support and that of my colleagues in withdrawing from the Executive.

I wish the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and all the other Ministers well in the difficult task that lies ahead of them. I pray that not only devolution but decommissioning takes place in full, so that peace can at last come to that troubled Province.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the House that Madam Speaker has ruled that there will be a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench Members' speeches.

10.45 pm

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): After 27 years of the most torrid life that any part of Europe has seen, it is a rather strange feeling for me this evening, having been active in politics for those 27 years, to stand in the Chamber literally on the threshold of the end of one era and the beginning of another.

From Whitelaw to Mandelson is a long time. There is more than one Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the Chamber this evening—there are previous Secretaries of State; and there is more than one former Northern Ireland Minister and more than one present Minister. Collectively, so that I leave no one out, I sincerely thank them all for their efforts as Secretaries of State and as Ministers for trying to help in the most appalling situation that the House will ever deal with in terms of the violence, suffering and trauma that people have lived through.

I do not want to plough over the past but I wish to emphasise that we will never know the suffering of people in the north of Ireland. We will never know the depth and the scope of it. However, we all know collectively, especially Members from Northern Ireland and those in the political process who are not Members of this place, that we as a political process owe it not only to the people who are alive in Northern Ireland and not only to those who died, but to those whose lives are in front of them to take this opportunity and mould it into a future in a way that ensures that the past will never be conceivable and will never happen again.

The Good Friday agreement was the product of many long years of effort by Prime Ministers, Secretaries of State, Ministers and Members. That was the beginning of the end of the horror of those 27 years. The Mitchell review was the penultimate step to that end. Now, 602 days after the signing of the Good Friday agreement, we stand at the end of that era of death, suffering and violence. However, paradoxically, as we reach that end we are at the beginning of a new era, a new dispensation, a new hope and a new confidence that we, the people of Northern Ireland, and those of us who are charged and honoured to represent them politically, will change the future.

We will make this work because we know the alternative to it. We will make it work because we owe it to everyone in Northern Ireland. We owe it to everyone in this country who suffered greatly too. We owe it also to people in the Republic of Ireland and to those abroad, especially in the United States and Europe, who helped us to try to solve our problems. We shall do so in the sense of the Mitchell review and in the direction in which it pointed us. I join in the thanks to George Mitchell for his skill, patience and steeliness, which should never be underestimated.

George Mitchell asked us to do two things. That should not be too much for any of us. One is to take responsibility for our future and our own well-being. That we do at midnight on Wednesday. The other is to get rid of illegal arms within our society. That we must do, if only for the most base political consideration, because people agreed in the Mitchell review that that must and should be done.

Both of those things must happen. I am confident that they will, because I am confident that we will build a new future and a new relationship, no longer one of abject dependence on philosophies that are outmoded, outdated and irrelevant to the type of world in which we live.

We will build a new society and a new dispensation, based on an absence of hostilities, which will create a Northern Ireland that is at peace with itself and at peace with its neighbours, with strong north-south linkages, interacting with a devolved United Kingdom and working within a devolved and common European framework. Then we can look at some of the philosophies that guided people towards violence in the north of Ireland and see how dated and outmoded they are.

However, problems are not ended when devolution comes; they begin, and there will be many of them. There will be myriad problems to be overcome, but I am certain of one thing. With the resolve, the good will and the new relationship that we must build, those can and will be overcome. I also believe that by dealing with those problems together, we will all emerge better people as a community, better politicians and better able to pay our debt to all the people, past and present, who deserve to have that debt paid.

Finally, I repeat that we made solemn promises in the agreement on Good Friday. We made solemn promises again in the Mitchell review. This is an opportunity for all of us collectively to make another solemn promise tonight that we will deliver on a future that we ourselves will create, with the help of the House and the help of the Irish Government and our friends abroad.

I do not want to overplay the theme, but I believe that for the first time we can all use a common understanding of the words, "We shall overcome."

10.54 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): It is a pleasure to follow my colleague, the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon). May I associate myself with the thanks that he expressed, and the thanks expressed by the Secretary of State, to all those who have helped to bring us to this point.

I welcome the order, which will result in a significant devolution of power to the Northern Ireland Assembly and bring an end to direct rule. May I say, in passing, that there never should have been direct rule. There was not direct rule before Stormont, and if it should ever be necessary for the Secretary of State to come back to the Dispatch Box to revoke the order that he is making today, there is no need to go back to direct rule, because the legislative authority for Northern Ireland will remain in the House, and the executive authority is vested in the Queen. Consequently, should it ever be necessary for the Secretary of State to revoke the order, it will not be necessary for him to do anything further.

We should never have had the debasement of democracy that was direct rule. We are ending that tonight, just as on Thursday we shall be ending the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Irish Government's quite improper territorial claim. Those are substantial matters for the people of Northern Ireland, which are well worth stretching for as we have stretched ourselves in order to achieve them. We are doing that in the course of the implementation of the Mitchell review and, as others have said tonight, that review is based on bringing about devolution and the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons.

We have always sought to ensure that devolution is accompanied by decommissioning. It is no secret that my colleagues and I would have preferred decommissioning to have happened in closer association with devolution—rather than happening now, effectively sequentially—but we are about to complete the process of devolution; it will be completed on Thursday. The process of decommissioning should begin on Thursday and we are, in effect, passing the baton on to the republican movement. It will need to move rapidly, and it knows that.

Reference has been made—not only in the House but in public comments—to the resolution that was passed by my party's council on Saturday and, in particular, to its intention to revisit this matter in February. All I shall say about that is that all the resolution does by arranging for a meeting in February is simply regularise what would otherwise inevitably happen. No one should be perturbed in any way by what has happened.

As the Secretary of State said, yesterday we nominated a number of people for ministerial and other offices through the application of the d'Hondt formula. I say to those Members of the House who are enthusiastic proponents of proportional representation in all its forms that, having experienced that particular form of it, I cannot recommend it. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] There were, of course, particular reasons why, in the course of the Northern Ireland talks, we adopted that formula, but its operation yesterday was, in some respects, somewhat capricious and produced results that would not otherwise have happened under what we would have regarded as a more normal system. However, I have to say to the House that it is a matter of pride for myself and my colleagues in the Ulster Unionist Assembly party that we were the only group that did not have to take an adjournment to work out what to do next.

I have to say, too, that I look forward to working with those who have been nominated under that process—the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh and, indeed, the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson). I hope that we shall work closely together—*[Laughter.]* Perhaps even in the same room, from time to time.

I met this morning a journalist who came to interview me. He told me that he had just interviewed a member of the Democratic Unionist party who had obtained an appointment yesterday, saying that that person—it is not the hon. Member for Belfast, East—was bursting with enthusiasm and eager to get to grips with his job. I think that that is true not only of those who have been selected, but of the community as a whole in Northern Ireland. This morning, I had the pleasure of meeting a party of 25 people from Portadown who were visiting the Assembly. They, too, were looking forward to what we hope will be a new era.

Some matters are problems that remain unresolved. The Secretary of State knows what they are. He will have today received the submission from my party in response to the Patten recommendations. I hope that he will study it and see, as he comes forward with the Government's conclusions on the recommendations, that we should steer away from some of the sillier proposals that Patten made. On examination, I think that he will discover how ill-advised so many of those proposals are, but I shall not go into them now.

Another problem is the criminal justice review, which should have been completed by now but has been delayed. That delay is causing concern because we are aware of some other foolish ideas that are being canvassed by the members of that review, particularly with regard to what is called restorative justice. In my view, it is—in the form in which it is being operated by the Northern Ireland Office in some pilot schemes—contrary to the European convention on human rights. I remind the Secretary of State that the order brings the Human Rights Act 1998 into operation for a large number of matters in Northern Ireland, so that needs to be considered carefully.

I look forward to the time when policing and criminal justice matters are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. I hope that that will happen as soon as possible, because we should take control of that important aspect.

I shall not say much more because many other hon. Members want to speak. I simply say once again that we welcome this measure and hope to carry it through to fruition.

11 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): When the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) made the announcement that led directly to this order, I was one of a small minority who expressed reservations about the whole process. It is with considerable relief that I make a short contribution this evening. If I may, I want to impress two points on the House.

First, I want to pick up the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) made in his typically generous and graceful contribution. He was at pains to point out Members of the House who have played some part in bringing about this order. I should like to name three people who are present and have been crucial to this process.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) has negotiated thus far, though there have been considerable difficulties with his party. That cannot have been an easy task, and the bravery that he has shown is well supported in the country as a whole.

[Mr. Frank Field]

My hon. Friend the Member for Newry and Armagh has a particular role in the House for English Members and English constituents. Irish Members have come on the media to condemn brutal murders. If my hon. Friend came on, no one could tell from how he phrased his anger and disgust whether the person murdered was a Protestant or a Catholic. Sadly, that was not true of all spokesmen in Northern Ireland. Like the right hon. Member for Upper Bann, the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh has a particular place in the affections of the House for the courage that he has shown over a long period.

It would be wrong if I did not also mention the Secretary of State. Although some will dismiss this movement and these events as inevitable and what history is about, I believe that individuals have played an important part in bringing us to this point. The Secretary of State has shown an array of skills, especially knowing when crucial guarantees should be given, and giving them. His statement to the House on Monday of last week played an important part in ensuring that the right hon. Member for Upper Bann had a majority on Saturday when the vote came, rather than a deficit. I would not want someone who had previously been a critic of this process to let events go past without admiring the skills that the Secretary of State has displayed.

We are celebrating an important event of this Parliament in a proper, reserved way and with a certain anxiousness, because it is not without risk. In the week that we take this action, a terrorist organisation in Spain that did not surrender its arms has given notice that it believes that it should now turn its back on the democratic process. However, I think that two powerful forces will work for the success of this agreement, beyond those highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Newry and Armagh.

First, if we pay attention to the local government by-elections in the Republic of Ireland, we already see the effects that the potential agreement is having in the politics of these islands. Sinn Fein is emerging as a major challenger for power in the Republic; the Irish Prime Minister therefore has an added interest in ensuring that those who said at some stage they should surrender their arms do so, for there are major consequences for the polity of his own country.

The other factor that I believe is working for good, for security, and for effective democratic change is the Secretary of State's statement that if need be, he, with the Irish Government, would collapse many agreements that are coming into force if arms were not delivered. With typical skill, he did not define the time limit involved in that judgment.

I recall a comment made by Beatrice Webb when asked why her marriage was so successful. She said, "I leave all the important decisions to Sidney. I decide which are the important decisions." The Secretary of State, while giving a guarantee, has left in his own domain the timing in regard to when he will act on the statement that he made tonight and on Monday last week.

As someone who was sceptical about the whole process that the former Prime Minister initiated in the last Parliament, I wished, in my short speech, to thank three of the big figures who have brought the House to this stage. I also wished to emphasise that, although we celebrate the change in an appropriately low-key mood, it is still fraught with great difficulties. I believe that the statements made by the Secretary of State tonight and earlier will help to ensure the success of what we do now, rather than the opposite.

11.8 pm

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): This has been a year of amazing events, from the retirement of the leader of my party to the people's pregnancy. However, while the rest are basically accidents of circumstance, this is the biggest surprise of all. It says something about human nature: it proves that, for all the differences between all the sides, there was enough good to make the process work.

Flexibility has been fought for on every step of the way. The dangers have been well documented. Sometimes we almost forgot what the end was meant to be, but the end has been achieved, and I am pleased to note that even those who doubted the process have accepted the democratic will of the majority. There have been a few wobbles, and at some points it has not been entirely clear where the various parties have stood. For example, I continue to be concerned about those who seek to create a link between prisoner releases and the Good Friday agreement. That always struck me as an inappropriate connection. Having said that, let me add that I think we need to start looking forward, and burying those reservations with the past.

Sometimes it looked as though party politics were beginning to creep in. If party politics are allowed to interfere with the peace process, the result is an amazingly debilitating set of circumstances, and I think that that almost did slow the process down. However, I was glad to hear—it was reiterated tonight—that the official Opposition were genuinely behind the initiative. The meeting of senior Conservatives with Sinn Fein representatives a few weeks ago reiterated their willingness to give Sinn Fein the opportunity to take its place in the eyes of the public, as well as in Northern Ireland, as a serious political player.

About two weeks ago, I was at a prize day at my old school, the Royal Belfast academical institution. When I spoke there, I expressed the hope that we would get there in the end and that children at the school would not have to live through the troubles and violence, and live in the completely sectarian environment that, unfortunately, so many children have had to live in for so many years. It seems now that they will not have to grow up in that environment. My feeling is that, more than anything, if the process works, they will be encouraged to take a completely different outlook on people from different parts of the sectarian divide. Indeed, I like to think that, in 20 or 30 years, the very phrase "sectarian divide" will have fallen from public use because it will no longer have any meaning.

I noted the comments of the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) with regard to Martin McGuinness and his concerns that that gentleman should not be the Education Minister—but that is devolution. It

is not our remit to determine who the Minister should be. It is important that we understand that our job is to ensure that people have the space to make the democratic decisions that they want without interference from over here.

Mr. MacKay: To put the record straight, I did not say that Martin McGuinness should not be a Minister. I said that many people, understandably, deeply regretted that he is and that he has to prove himself. I acknowledge that, under the agreement, he has every right to be appointed under the d'Hondt formula. I just put that right.

Mr. Öpik: I stand corrected. It underlines the importance of us making it clear that we will not meddle in processes and in decisions that are, rightly, in the hands of the Province. I understand from his intervention that the right hon. Gentleman is confirming that his party accepts the legitimate right of those who are elected as Ministers in Northern Ireland to play their role in that process.

Thanks have already been given. The list was pretty comprehensive. I should like to say again what I said a few days ago: it is worth remembering that the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) was instrumental in beginning the whole process. To that extent, one of the great triumphs that he should be proud of, and that we should acknowledge on both sides of the House, is the courage that he showed as Prime Minister in taking big political risks to move the process forward.

Of course, the current Administration, including the Secretary of State, have played an important part as well. Sometimes it is easy to forget the pivotal role that the right hon. Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam) played in beginning to bring the republicans into the political process in a positive way. She deserves great credit for what was a unique contribution in that area.

Of course, the future holds some difficulties. Those who have been involved with devolution in Wales and Scotland know that there will be a period of readjustment between the House of Commons and Northern Ireland as we begin to understand how the devolution process works. That will take one or two years. I suspect that there will be frictions in that process, but is it not great to be in the same sort of political environment as Scotland and Wales, where the issues are ones of interaction, rather than whether we can set up the process in the first place?

The whole process is not just a lesson for Northern Ireland, or the United Kingdom. It is a lesson for the world stage of politics. It shows that, with courage, determination and some good faith, almost anything is possible. Almost anything can be resolved, however unlikely the goal may seem as we embark on such a process.

For anyone who has lived in Northern Ireland, the order is a personal thing. When I watched politics as I grew up, I envisaged that, perhaps at some point in the future, I would see the sort of momentous changes that needed to be implemented for peace to become a reality. Back then, I did not expect that I would be here in person now to vote in favour of such an important order. It is almost unbelievable. As the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) said, this is a new beginning that has a strong emotional overtone for the people of Northern Ireland.

Naturally, we support the order. It is an honour for me to be here to observe the proceedings—which are a triumph of reason over emotion—and for that I shall always be grateful.

11.15 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): The order says:

"Whereas, it having appeared to the Secretary of State that sufficient progress had been made in implementing the agreement".

So we are asked to say that sufficient progress has been made. That statement will then become law and cannot be gone back on—yet no progress has been made on decommissioning.

I am disturbed by the Secretary of State's attempts to paint things differently from how they are. He should tell the truth. Everyone knows my party's attitude on the issue; we have fought two elections on it. Our position is clear and was spelled out in our manifesto. It ill becomes the Secretary of State to bandy about words such as "hypocrites" and "hypocrisy" when he is well filled with those himself.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must withdraw that remark. He should not refer to any Member of Parliament with words such as "hypocrisy".

Rev. Ian Paisley: I wonder why the same remark can be said about me by the Secretary of State, but nothing is said—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State did not say that about the hon. Gentleman, I can assure him of that. He would not have done that in my presence. I repeat, the hon. Gentleman cannot continue his speech until he withdraws that remark.

Rev. Ian Paisley: If there are two laws in the House, I shall withdraw the remark.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I note that the hon. Gentleman has withdrawn the remark, but there is only one law.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I want to put on the record what my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) said yesterday in the Assembly. His words show that all the Secretary of State's so-called optimism about the Democratic Unionist party surrendering its principles is false. My hon. Friend said:

"Everyone here knows that I am one of the sternest opponents of the Belfast Agreement. I have consistently maintained that the purpose and the objective of the agreement is to have Northern Ireland absorbed in a united Ireland through developing all-Ireland institutions. I still believe that to be the process underlying it. Whether a Member or a Minister, as a convinced Unionist I shall use every ounce of influence I possess to frustrate and thwart Northern Ireland's being conveyed into a united Ireland."

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Rev. Ian Paisley: No, I will not. The Deputy Speaker tells me that, as the second speaker from Northern Ireland tonight, I have to cut short my speech. I am not giving way to any hon. Member—or right hon. Member—from the Labour Benches.

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

My hon. Friend continued:

"Moreover, it remains for me a fundamental principle that only those who are committed to use exclusively peaceful and democratic means are suitable partners in government."

This House tonight seems to think that a suitable partner in government is a man whose hands drip with the blood not only of the people whom I represent in the House, but of his own fellow Roman Catholics. Hon. Members should go and read about the sobs of a widow in Londonderry. Mr. McGuinness got her son to return from exile with a promise that nothing would happen to him, but he was sent for, taken out and brutally murdered. Hon. Members should talk to her about what Mr. McGuinness really stands for.

My hon. Friend continued:

"The call of my conscience and the commitments I have given to the people of Northern Ireland are unalterable. I oppose terrorism in all its forms and of every shade. Whether it be the murder of a friend or that of an odious adversary, I oppose it without qualification and without any mental reservation. As far as my conduct as a prospective Minister may be an issue, I want to place firmly on the record my intention and disposition to be scrupulously fair in every respect, while exercising such responsibilities as may be in my charge. The religious conviction or political opinion of any person or any group will form no part of the judgment I will make on any matter. I shall work for everyone in this community seeking for them a better deal. I consider myself to be the servant of all and the master of none."

I hope that no other hon. Member will try to do what the Secretary of State tried to do tonight to Democratic Unionist Members. Those Members took office not because this House wanted them to, but because the people of Northern Ireland—according to the laws of this House—gave two seats to the Democratic Unionist party. The Secretary of State, like others who have occupied his position, would like to get rid of the Democratic Unionist party. However, I am afraid that it happens to be here to stay, and will at least outlast the short life that he will have in Northern Ireland.

There is not one truly democratic country in the whole world which would, for one moment, accept the principle that armed gunmen, thugs and murderers, with their hands dripping with the blood of their fellow countrymen, their fellow co-religionists and their fellow citizens should, as of right, be given office in government. Where would we find another democracy passing a measure like this? It is a fundamental of a pure and proper democracy that only those who have eschewed murder and bloodshed should be permitted to be placed in the government of their country.

There used to be laws to keep criminals from taking office. Now we are asked to pass a law to put criminals into office—and the Government think that the people of Northern Ireland should join in some happy ceremony on this occasion. They should go and tell that to the widows, the orphans and those with vacant seats in their houses, and they will get an answer. The Secretary of State needs to talk to, not lock the doors on, those victims and the people who are in tears daily because of the agonies they have suffered. He should listen to what they have to say.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Rev. Ian Paisley: No, I will not.

The House is asked to approve a law that provides that those who have engaged in murder—the most heinous and atrocious of murders—must have a way opened for them to get into the government of Northern Ireland. That is what we are being asked to do. True democracy rests on a bedrock of liberty. It was established not to satisfy the views and aspirations of a mere single generation, but to secure the blessings of enduring principles of liberty—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I call the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman).

11.25 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): We have heard a characteristically impassioned but wrong-headed speech from the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley). I endorse the warm compliments paid by the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon).

I also offer my compliments to that remarkable woman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam). In the early days when she took office she faced formidable problems, but she behaved with immense courage. The fact that we now have an international tribunal reviewing the Bloody Sunday affair is a tribute to her.

There are those on the Opposition Benches who see these developments as the further unravelling of the United Kingdom, but we have a different United Kingdom to the one we lived in just two years ago. It is now a multinational state based on, among other things, the principle of consent. That holds for the people of Scotland, the people of Wales and, of course, the people of Northern Ireland. In the many years that I sat on the Opposition Benches, I did not think that I would see the setting up of a Scottish Parliament, but it is now firmly established, as is the Northern Ireland Executive, with the Assembly about to begin work.

I have said over and over again that the critical factor of decommissioning has to be addressed. It looms over the Executive and the Assembly, and the paramilitaries must co-operate with General de Chastelain to ensure the comprehensive and viable decommissioning of weaponry. However, as I have said before, everybody in Northern Ireland stands to gain from the Assembly, based as it is on the principle of consent.

That admirable politician, Monica McWilliams, who, I am glad to say, is a member of the Assembly, said yesterday:

"It has taken a tremendous amount of time to get here. True, the mood music we heard today was the one we have got used to at Stormont. But I think people are anxious to get into their new jobs and they will work well together once they have settled in.

I believe the new Ministers are all anxious to prove they are the best Ministers for their particular areas and that can only be good for Northern Ireland."

I hope that that holds for the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson). I hope and trust that all of the Ministers will do their damnedest to improve the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland.

There will be some lively, even heated, exchanges when the new Ministers are cross-examined by the Scrutiny Committees. I can tell the hon. Members who

are going to be Ministers that new Scottish Ministers have found appearing in front of Committees in the Edinburgh Parliament a somewhat interesting experience. There are certainly some interesting pairings of Ministers and the Chairs of Committees in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Whatever hon. Members may think of Mr. McGuinness, and I certainly have serious reservations about him, I was much taken by his comment yesterday that he is committed to the campaign for the integration of schools and is opposed to the 11-plus. Hon. Members with constituencies in Ulster will know how often I have spoken against the 11-plus. As someone who failed the exam, I have always thought that it should be abolished anyway. The words used by Mr. McGuinness were reassuring.

The Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my old and hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall), carried on the work involved in the integration of schools. Such integration is a force for good—long may it continue and develop. As a child, I attended a Catholic school. If it were possible for me to have children again, I would not send them to segregated schools. The integration question is very important in the context of Northern Ireland.

Finally, those with the appropriate responsibilities should ensure that a programme is set up in the near future to bring together cross-border organisations and other bodies. From a Scottish perspective, we now talk about British-Irish relations and about a different kind of United Kingdom.

I believe that another force for good is the Council of the Isles. Hon. Members, especially the right hon. Member for Upper Bann, will not be surprised to hear me say that if that council could be given a permanent secretariat, after the manner of the Nordic Council, it would make good sense to locate that secretariat in Glasgow. That is my appeal. It could not be based in Greenock—[HON. MEMBERS: "Why not?"]. I assure my hon. Friends that it would make good sense to locate the secretariat in Scotland rather than in Dublin or London.

I say to those hon. Members who are members of the Unionist parties in Northern Ireland that they and their constituents have everything to gain from this Assembly.

11.32 pm

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): I think that there is nothing that I should add at this hour, save to congratulate all those who have brought us this far and to give my party's good wishes to all concerned. Everyone knows how much there is to do. The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) said, in effect, that the apparent end is in fact the beginning. I agree.

The Opposition would like to say to all concerned, "Good luck with the beginning, the middle and the end. God speed."

11.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): By the standards of the best of this House, in many ways this has been a good debate. The right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) made a good speech. I could not agree with all of it, but he acknowledged that it has been a long and difficult path that has led from the problems of the past to the present position. On behalf of my departmental colleagues, may I say how glad I am that the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, even though they may not have been with us throughout the entire journey, should be here at the end of it.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell spoke about Mr. Martin McGuinness. He, and the rest of the House, should remember that there are still two communities in Northern Ireland. The whole process has been about healing the wounds of the past and bringing in parity of esteem for the future. I hope that Martin McGuinness, Bairbre de Brun and all the other Ministers will play their part, and that the right hon. Gentleman, and the whole House, will encourage them to work towards healing divisions and making a future for all the people of Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon)—typically, if I may say so—made a moving speech. Assuming for one moment the mantle of responding to him on behalf of all past and present Ministers, I thank him for his kind words to all of those who have served at any time in Northern Ireland.

I pay tribute to the vision that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have held on to, often in unimaginably difficult circumstances, and to congratulate him and all the other pro-agreement parties on now seeing a time when that vision can be realised. His eloquence tonight was the expression of the eloquence of almost all the community in Northern Ireland and I congratulate him on the role that he has played tonight and for many years, in bringing us to where we are today.

The right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) has rightly received many compliments in recent days and months. More than anyone, he has recognised the substantial gains that the Good Friday agreement brings to his community, yes, but also to everyone in Northern Ireland—I know that, increasingly, he will want to speak for the whole community in the future. It is a future that puts aside violence, in which communities come together instead of driving each other apart. The right hon. Gentleman, through his courage, which has often been commented on, his good sense, which I have often witnessed and respected, and with the wit that he has shown tonight, has played an important part in that process—probably one of the key parts—alongside Senator Mitchell and others.

The right hon. Gentleman said that he feels—perhaps rightly—that some issues remain unresolved. While there is not time for me to deal with those issues in detail in this debate, he well knows that the door of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is always open to him and to the other parties that have matters that they still need to resolve. My right hon. Friend will welcome him and those other parties. He will keep that door open to them.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who is also a friend, paid tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I have watched him work in recent weeks and he has indeed shown a great deal of skill and commitment, but also a great deal of principle in building on the work that many of his predecessors—most recently my right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam)—have put into bringing us to where we are today. This is indeed a momentous point in history and a great deal of trust and responsibility will rest on the shoulders of my right hon.

[Mr. George Howarth]

Friend the Secretary of State in the weeks and months to come. He will take those responsibilities as seriously in the future as he has in the past.

Mr. Field: While in no way do I want to detract from the compliments that I and many others rightly paid the Secretary of State, I was also trying to point out the strength of feeling on both sides of the House to support him in insisting that at some stage—we hope soon—arms are surrendered.

Mr. Howarth: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. It is well made. The comments of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the undertakings that he has given stand on the record. They are serious commitments and undertakings.

Mr. Thompson: The Secretary of State made it absolutely clear that decommissioning is a voluntary act. If that is so, how can he fulfil his promise to take quick resolution if the action is not carried out?

Mr. Howarth: My right hon. Friend has also made it clear that there is a package, with devolution on the one hand and decommissioning on the other. He has given clear and unambiguous undertakings that he will monitor the progress of both matters; default on one side will have consequences. The hon. Gentleman may not like to accept that; he may not like its implications. However, that is the reality of the undertakings given by my right hon. Friend; that is why the Ulster Unionist party, last Saturday, decided to give the process a go.

More in sorrow than in anger, I come to the speech of the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley). I do not propose to deal with all the points that he made. However, he made a specific attack on the intentions expressed by my right hon. Friend in his opening speech. By way of clarification, when my right hon. Friend referred to the hon. Member for North Antrim and his party, he had in mind the fact that, after 30 years of telling us that Ulster says no, the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues were remarkably swift-footed in saying yes when it came to taking up ministerial positions. Although we welcome that news, the hon. Gentleman may have to make some explanations as to how that came about to the people who have put their trust in him in the past.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I got 195,000 votes.

Mr. Howarth: I have some affection for the hon. Gentleman. That is not the first occasion on which he has shouted at me. I congratulate him and his colleagues on taking up Government posts. I hope that they will play a constructive role.

This is truly a moment in history when, for the most part, Members of the House have been patient and understanding. On occasion, we have been willing to suspend our collective judgment in the hope that that will help. As a House, we have played our part in this piece of history. Of course, we should acknowledge and remember all the past suffering, but I hope that the hon. Member for North Antrim and all those who do not wish the process well will join us in wanting to see a future for all the people of Northern Ireland—a future in which they will all have a stake and in which they can all take their place, not only with pride, but with confidence that it is indeed all of their future.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 318, Noes 10.

Division No. 7] **[11.43 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkins, Charlotte
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cran, James
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Ennis, Jeff
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen

Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mallon, Seamus
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Mates, Michael
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walker, Cecil
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Beggs, Roy
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Forsythe, Clifford
Hunter, Andrew
Paterson, Owen
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Swayne, Desmond
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. William Thompson and Rev. Ian Paisley.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Appointed Day) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 29th November, be approved.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 108 (Welsh Grand Committee (sittings)),

That the Welsh Grand Committee shall meet on Tuesday 14th December at half past Ten o'clock at Westminster to take questions under Standing Order No. 103, (Welsh Grand Committee (questions for oral answer)), and to consider the matter of the Government's legislative programme as outlined in the Queen's Speech and the Chancellor's Pre-budget Report as they relate to Wales, under Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee (matters relating exclusively to Wales)).—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

Diabetes

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

11.55 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Thank you Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to raise—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. An hon. Member is addressing the House, so other hon. Members should leave the Chamber quietly.

Mr. Sanders: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an important issue in the House. I have declared a relevant interest. It has been pointed out that some might take offence at a Member of Parliament addressing the House in a dinner jacket, but that is unavoidable: I came here straight from an event to which I hope to return at the end of business.

Currently, 140 million people throughout the world are known to have diabetes. That figure—

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In the previous debate, you made a ruling in respect of something I said. May I draw your attention to column 605 of the *Hansard* of 24 November? At that time, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland made certain comments which could be taken to refer to only one person, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson). I should like you to read the *Hansard* and give a ruling on the matter.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The matter will be looked into. Let us return to the Adjournment debate.

Mr. Sanders: Currently, more than 140 million people around the world are known to have diabetes. That figure is projected to rise to 300 million by 2025. In the UK, the figure is currently 1.4 million, and it rises every week.

Diabetes is the biggest single cause of blindness among adults of working age in the UK. The risk of hospital admission owing to heart disease is increased fourfold among those with diabetes. Diabetes is one of the most common causes of kidney failure. Half of all lower limb amputations other than those carried out following trauma are a consequence of the disease. Diabetes consumes more than 5 per cent. of health care spending in this country, which is £2.5 billion each year or £70 a second.

The Government's response has been to launch the national service framework on diabetes. It is imperative—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The best thing would be for the owner of that device to leave the Chamber.

Mr. Sanders: It is imperative that people with diabetes have access to top-quality diabetes care. I hope that the national service framework will achieve that, when it is published in 2001. The Government recently announced the co-chairs of the NSF expert reference group, and are currently assembling the core members of the group. I hope that people with diabetes are properly represented on the core group and topic sub-groups, because they are the end-users; they, like me, live with the condition every day. People with diabetes are the real experts and the Government should make full use of their input.

The scope of the NSF has yet to be announced, but I believe it to be imminent. Vital to the success of a comprehensive NSF is that it covers the entire diabetes life cycle, from cradle to grave. That means from diagnosis to treatment, and from childhood to old age.

At the beginning of this month, the British Diabetic Association launched its report on diabetes care in nursing and care homes. Research reveals numerous deficiencies in the care elderly people receive in care homes: lack of care planning, inadequate nutritional guidance, lack of specialist health expertise input, and inadequate and unstructured medical follow-up. With about one in 10 people in care homes having diabetes, that issue must be examined. I should like all to receive equal, high-quality care, and the BDA report makes a number of suggestions, based on the active involvement of individual residents, to rectify the shortcomings I have described. The Secretary of State has been sent a copy of the report, and I hope that he will respond positively and take action.

The Government announced in the Queen's Speech their proposals for a care standards Bill to improve care across social services in private and voluntary health care and in child care. I hope that such a Bill will have the desired effect. Meanwhile, the on-going "Fit For the Future?" consultation document on improving standards of residential care for older people is a further opportunity for progress.

It is important that better standards of care are introduced, and we need to end discrimination against people with diabetes. The recent implementation of the second European Community directive on driving licences effectively bans insulin-dependent diabetics from driving large vans and minibuses.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I first became aware of the absurd state of the law in relation to insulin-dependent drivers in the United Kingdom when one of my constituents, James Murray, who was a light goods vehicle driver, became insulin dependent and found himself almost overnight not entitled to an LGV licence or to retain the licence that he had previously held, which allowed him to drive vehicles between 3.5 and 7.5 tonnes and some minibuses.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the roots of the legislation lie in the directive to which he referred, but it is one that allows some flexibility to the member countries of the European Union. Does he agree that the James Murrays of this world will find it inexplicable that while our Government have applied the directive stringently, other European countries have protected existing drivers who have occupational licences by using the exceptional circumstances provisions of the directive?

Mr. Sanders: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. There are different interpretations and it is bizarre that a Dutch diabetic can come to the UK and drive a vehicle on our roads while a UK driving licence holder cannot drive the same vehicle if they are both insulin-dependent diabetics.

Since 1991, diabetics have been banned from driving heavy goods vehicles under the first EC directive on those matters. I would argue that the Department of the

Environment, Transport and the Regions has interpreted the second directive in an unnecessarily harsh way. I would reiterate the points that the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) made.

Since 1998, more than 1,000 people with diabetes who applied to renew their C1 licence, which allows them to drive a van or vehicle weighing between 3.5 and 7.5 tonnes, have had their application refused. My attention was recently drawn to the case of a man who ran a haulage firm in Kent for 26 years. Running the company meant moving lorries around in the depot. He lost his licence as a result of changing on to insulin. He was a diabetic before that happened. As he could not afford to hire an extra employee, he was forced out of business.

I have examples of people in my constituency who have had their earnings reduced—at worst they have lost their jobs—as a result of the restrictions. There are hundreds more cases of that sort, yet the Department's suspicion that people with a medical condition, such as diabetes, are less fit to drive than others is not substantiated by any medical or scientific evidence. Instead of a blanket ban, I believe that a system of individual assessment should be adopted by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency.

The EC directive under which the regulations were adopted allows for a certain amount of flexibility, and as I have mentioned, other EU member states take a more lenient approach. I am not advocating a lapse in road safety—far from it. Stringent annual health checks by a diabetes specialist should be used as a basis for individual risk assessment. Only those who show good blood glucose control and have no further complications would be allowed to drive larger vehicles or passenger carrying vehicles.

Blanket bans are always unfair and I am sure that many hon. Members will be aware from their postbags and surgeries that this discriminatory policy is causing distress to many people throughout the country. With the possibility of a third EC directive on driving in the pipeline, it is time that the Government reviewed their approach. Meanwhile, the Select Committee on Science and Technology is investigating the issue, and I hope that the Government take note of evidence to the Committee calling for a fresh look at the regulations.

Health care should be accessible, and that includes accessibility in terms of cost. Yet in many parts of the country people who use pen needles to inject insulin currently have to pay for their needles. I and a number of hon. Members on both sides of the House have been engaged in a long battle to make those needles available on prescription. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) for the work that he has done on the issue over the years.

When the current Secretary of State for Health was first at the Department, before his spell at the Treasury, he initiated a consultation process, but the matter has still not been resolved almost a year on. I see no justifiable reason why the decision should be delayed further. The Government have given an assurance that they agree with the principle that pen needles should be free on prescription. They say that they are still consulting, but surely the situation should not be allowed to drag on any longer.

Meanwhile, the Department of Health has yet to rule out the blacklisting of disposables as a cost-saving measure. Disposable pen needles are essential for people who have visual impairment or lack manual dexterity and find it difficult to fill reusable pens. These simple devices are a vital part of many people's diabetes control. I ask the Government not to delay any further, as the current situation discriminates against poorer people with diabetes.

Good health care should be a right in this day and age, and should not be based on ability to pay. I urge the Government to consider seriously the various points that I have raised tonight, and to ensure that people with diabetes are treated with equity, fairness and dignity.

12.6 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) on raising this important subject and making his points clearly and concisely. I am aware of his close interest in the subject, as the chair of the all-party group on diabetes and, as he told the House, because he himself has diabetes.

I hope to respond to all the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised. I begin by assuring the House of the seriousness with which the Government take diabetes. It is, as the House has heard, an important health issue in terms of both morbidity and mortality. More than 1 million people in the United Kingdom have diabetes, and that number is forecast to increase significantly over the next decade.

Diabetes has a significant impact on the national health service. Our estimate is rather higher than the hon. Gentleman's—diabetes and its complications account for at least 9 per cent. of health care costs in the UK. If it is not properly managed, diabetes can result in a range of long-term complications which the hon. Gentleman listed—blindness, renal failure, lower limb amputation and cardiovascular disease.

I acknowledge that there is some evidence of considerable variations around the country in the organisation and quality of diabetes services. For that reason among others, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), the former Secretary of State, announced in January that the next national service framework would cover diabetes. I shall return to the national service framework later and respond to other specific issues, but first I shall touch briefly on the wider context of Government policies for tackling diabetes.

The previous Administration signed up to, and we endorse, the St. Vincent declaration, which recommended action in key areas and set outcome targets. The principles and targets of the St. Vincent declaration have been at the core of what successive Governments have done on diabetes, in partnership with health service providers, the British Diabetic Association and others.

The St. Vincent joint task force for diabetes set up by the Department and the BDA made recommendations in 1995 about good clinical and management practice in 11 agreed priority areas. That was followed in November 1997 by service guidance for the NHS entitled "Key features of a good diabetes service", which was developed by a sub-group of the Department's clinical outcomes group. The key features guidance made suggestions about how health authorities, working in partnership with primary care and all those involved in the planning and

[Mr. John Denham]

delivery of local diabetes services, including people with the condition, should work together to agree a structured programme of diabetes care.

A raft of other work feeds into the new quality agenda. The Government are supporting a range of current activities to improve knowledge-based decision making in diabetes care. The Department has commissioned new national clinical guidelines for type 2 diabetes, and other clinical effectiveness materials.

The hon. Gentleman rightly stressed the importance of the user's perspective and needs and of ensuring that the NHS provides effective services to meet them. We attach great importance to involving patients, carers and the wider public in decisions about health service delivery, and we also want individual patients to play a greater role in determining the care that the NHS gives them. An NHS that works effectively with patients will deliver better results for individual patients and better health for the whole population.

An example of that is the Bradford health action zone programme, which is developing models for delivering accredited diabetes care within primary care. The Bradford HAZ has set up a network of local diabetes satellite clinics in general practitioners' surgeries and, instead of visiting hospital, patients can receive specialist care locally. That is an example of how our determination to modernise the NHS and tackle inequalities is already improving services.

The BDA is also participating in the expert patients task force, headed by the chief medical officer, which was announced in the White Paper "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation" and met for the first time last week. The task force will design a programme to help people with a chronic disease or disability such as diabetes to take the lead in managing their condition, with appropriate support from the health service.

The Government are making a major contribution to diabetes research through the Medical Research Council and NHS support for research and development. The MRC, which is the main agency through which we support medical and clinical research, spends about £3.5 million a year on diabetes. In addition to commissioning specific projects, the Department supports research funded by charities such as the BDA and the MRC, which takes place in the NHS. More than £4 million a year of that funding supports endocrinology and diabetes research.

I shall deal briefly with issues surrounding diabetes screening. The UK national screening committee is considering the case for introducing a screening programme targeted at people at high risk of contracting type 2 diabetes. We expect to receive its advice later next year, and it will also be linking type 2 diabetes with other risk factors in its consideration of screening for vascular disease. It also recently commissioned a working group to develop proposals for a national screening programme for diabetic retinopathy. The proposals being developed would ensure national coverage to national quality standards.

I deal now with some of the specific issues raised by the hon. Gentleman. On driving and diabetes, I am afraid that there is little more that I can say this evening. The way in which the driving licences of people with diabetes treated by insulin are considered is of course a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Briefly, as the hon. Gentleman said, the current position is based on European legislation—the second driving licence directive. That directive provides for licensing restrictions on those with insulin-treated diabetes—in particular in respect of driving heavier vehicles—based on risks associated with insulin treatment. I understand that the advisory panel on diabetes and driving, which advises my right hon. Friend, has, over a long period, consistently advised against the granting of licences to drive the largest vehicles, such as lorries and buses, to people with insulin-treated diabetes, based on its knowledge of the risk of a hypoglycaemic attack occurring without warning and the associated road safety risk.

That bar was extended to small lorries and minibuses on implementation of the second driving licence directive which, for people with insulin-treated diabetes, came into effect at the beginning of 1998. However, on the advice of the panel, the Government felt able to relax the law in September last year to allow drivers of small lorries to renew entitlement obtained before 1 January 1997, provided that they can satisfy specified conditions. I shall of course draw the attention of the relevant Minister to the debate. I am also aware, as is the hon. Gentleman, that the Science and Technology Committee is currently considering diabetes and driving licences.

Mr. Browne: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I realise that the issue that exercises me is the responsibility of another Department, but when he draws the debate to the attention of the relevant Minister, will he stress that the arguments are fundamentally underpinned by a desire for the Department to treat people with this disability as individuals, not a coherent group? We are arguing for an approach that recognises people's individuality and that would reflect the stance that other European countries appear to be adopting.

Mr. Denham: I repeat my undertaking to draw the appropriate Minister's attention to the points that have been made in this debate. However, it is not for me to intrude on the responsibilities of another Department.

The hon. Member for Torbay expressed concern about the inadequate diabetes care suffered by some elderly people in residential care homes. That issue was highlighted recently in a report by the BDA. Among the deficiencies identified by the BDA were a lack of diabetes care planning, inadequate dietary advice, a lack of specialist health professional input, high ratios of staff with no experience of diabetes and a lack of diabetes training for care home staff. The report raised serious issues and made important recommendations, which we shall consider further. In particular, I confirm that this aspect will fall within the scope of the national service framework for diabetes. The BDA report will help to inform its development.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the care standards Bill announced in the Queen's Speech is relevant because it is designed to drive up standards in care services, with a new independent regulatory system to inspect care homes and other services against national standards. Also relevant is the consultation document "Fit for the Future?", which includes proposed standards for older people in residential and nursing homes.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of the availability of insulin injection pens and needles on GP prescription. We consulted between February and April this year on a proposal that was designed to open the way for insulin pen needles and reusable insulin injection pens to be available on GP prescription on the NHS. Reusable pens and needles would be free to people with diabetes who need treatment with insulin and who produce the necessary prescription charge exemption certificate.

The proposal on which we consulted was to prevent GP prescribing of pre-filled, disposable, insulin injection pens because it was significantly more expensive to administer insulin using those pens than using reusable pens, and they seemed to offer no clinical benefits or benefits of patient convenience or comfort to justify the extra cost.

Most of the organisations consulted responded, including the companies that market insulin pens and needles, which have proposed to equalise the costs of pre-filled and reusable pen-based insulin regimes by adjusting their pricing. We thought that this proposal, which would have avoided the need for the proposed blacklisting of pre-filled pens, was well worth exploring with the companies. It was clear from the consultation that some people felt there was a need for pre-filled pens because they are less fiddly to use. Some people with diabetes who could not use the reusable pen may be able to use the pre-filled pen. The companies' proposal offered one way of responding to this need, although not the only way.

We are currently in negotiation with the companies. A central point is agreeing a price for the reusable pens that is fair and affordable to the NHS. We wrote to the companies about a month ago, setting out prices that we believed were fair. We asked for their reactions, and the ball is now in their court. If they agree to our pricing proposals, we can quickly make reusable pens and needles available through GPs on the NHS. If not, we will have to consider what alternative options might be open to us. That may well include making pen needles available on GP prescription while postponing a decision on making some or all reusable pens similarly available. It would not, however, be sensible for us to postpone a decision on pre-filled pens.

Allowing pen needles to be prescribed could make use of the pre-filled pen more attractive than at present, because people would no longer have to buy the needles for them. To forestall growth in this relatively expensive way of administering insulin, we may need to return to the original proposal of blacklisting pre-filled pens, or at least restricting their availability to those who really need them. I share the hon. Gentleman's impatience to see this matter resolved, and I assure him that we are endeavouring to make progress as quickly as possible.

I referred earlier to various initiatives to improve services for people with diabetes. They are valuable, but they will have their greatest impact if they have to take place in a clear structure that holds those who deliver services to account.

Shortly after taking office, we set out in the White Paper "The New NHS—Modern, Dependable" and the policy document "A First Class Service—Quality in the New NHS" a range of measures to raise quality and standards and to decrease unacceptable variations in service. We said that standards would be set by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and by national service frameworks. For the first time in the history of the NHS, we are setting clear national standards to guarantee fair treatment wherever patients live.

The national service framework for diabetes will be published in 2001, for implementation in the NHS from spring 2002. The national service framework will set national standards, define service models, introduce strategies to support implementation and delivery, and establish performance measures against which progress within an agreed time scale will be measured and monitored.

We have started work in earnest on the diabetes NSF. We have been putting together a team of officials at the Department to co-ordinate its development, and working out a project plan. As the hon. Gentleman said, last month we announced the appointment of the co-chairs of the expert reference group for the diabetes NSF. We shall soon announce the scope of the NSF and also the terms of reference and membership of the expert reference group. It will bring together representatives of the main interested parties, including diabetologists and other health care professionals and managers, service users and carers and partner agencies.

Mr. Sanders: And patients?

Mr. Denham: Service users will certainly include patients—those who have diabetes. The group hopes to meet in the near future, once we have announced its membership.

Each member of the expert reference group will be expected to play an active role and to take responsibility for advice on specific topic areas within the scope of the diabetes NSF. That scope will be broadly drawn, covering prevention, identification and management of diabetes and its major complications. As well as including people with diabetes on the expert reference group, we shall be looking at other ways to involve them in the development of the NSF, and as part of that the NSF will focus specifically on the needs of minority ethnic groups.

I hope that I have been able to respond as fully as possible to all the points raised by the hon. Gentleman in what was, even at this late hour, an important debate on a subject that interests many people.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-two minutes past Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Wednesday 1 December 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

UNITED REFORMED CHURCH BILL *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

Read a Second time, and committed.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

English/Welsh Border

1. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): What discussions he has had with *(a)* other members of the Government and *(b)* the National Assembly to ensure co-ordination of decisions affecting communities on the English/Welsh border. [98876]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have frequent discussions with my colleagues in the Government and with the members of the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales on a variety of issues. Co-ordination of decisions affecting communities on the Welsh/English border is a matter for bilateral discussion between the Assembly and the lead Whitehall Department. I would become involved if I were asked to intervene or to help to resolve a difficulty. I have received no such request.

Mr. O'Brien: In the light of that general position, will the Secretary of State answer a specific and current question of real concern to my constituents who live on the Welsh border? In the interests of co-ordination, now that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has announced that beef on the bone is safe, can I have an assurance that Griffiths butchers in the high street in Farndon in my English constituency and its rival, 200 yd away, in the high street in Holt in Wales, will be treated equally and will not be prosecuted for selling beef on the bone from yesterday?

Mr. Murphy: I wish both butchers well, obviously with a slight preference for the Welsh butchers. Following the decision by the chief medical officers for all the countries in the United Kingdom, there will be consistency in their recommendation. It rests with the individual Administrations to put the lifting of the ban into practice. That is the desire and the wish of the Welsh and the English Agriculture Ministers.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): May I remind my right hon. Friend that the communities of Itton, Devauden and St. Arvans in my constituency, which are very close to the border, are deeply concerned and disturbed by the decision of Forest Enterprise Wales to sell Chepstow Park wood for a private holiday development? The wood is in an area of outstanding natural beauty. When he has meetings with Ministers from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and with Welsh Assembly Secretaries, will he reassert the fact that the Government's policy is to have a moratorium on the sale of large-scale forests and say that Forest Enterprise should put a stop to the sale?

Mr. Murphy: I am very conscious of the problem, as I am a Gwent Member myself. My hon. Friend has raised the matter on several occasions. I have raised it with the First Secretary, who in turn is discussing it with Forest Enterprise. I know how important the matter is to my hon. Friend and I am convinced that there will be a satisfactory outcome to the campaign that he has led so effectively.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Will the Secretary of State consider the situation in parts of Powys, where there is a lack of co-ordination of the bus services crossing the border to cities and towns in England? There has been a breakdown in funding and some of the services have stopped running. Many people living in remote areas cannot get to the cities and towns. Will he also note that I had a meeting on Monday with Shropshire county council, Herefordshire county council and the Highways Agency about the refusal of road signs on the A49 in England, running along the border, to market towns in Wales?

Mr. Murphy: I have taken great note of what the hon. Gentleman has said. He highlights the important point that it is essential to have co-ordination and cross-border co-operation between the National Assembly and the appropriate authorities on the English side of the border, to ensure that we have the most efficient public transport and road systems.

New Deal

2. **Mr. Ted Rowlands** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): When he plans to meet the head of the Employment Service in Wales to discuss progress with the new deal. [98877]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I have had regular contact with the director of employment services to discuss progress on the new deal and other welfare-to-work issues in Wales, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State plans to meet the director in the near future.

Mr. Rowlands: My hon. Friend will be aware of how the new deal has revitalised employment services in Wales.

Will he seriously consider transferring the adult training programmes that are currently with the TECs to the employment services, or at least ensure that the forthcoming Bill on reorganising training will allow that possibility?

Mr. Hanson: The Bill has not yet been published, but when it is, those points will be taken on board and considered seriously. As it happens, I am meeting the director of employment services in Wales tomorrow, and we will certainly discuss those issues. I am sure that there will be plenty of opportunity to consider them as the Bill progresses through the House.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that there is no evidence whatever that people in Wales get jobs through the new deal for young people that they would not otherwise have secured, and plenty of evidence that people who go through the new deal do not secure jobs at the end of their course, what assessment has the Minister made of the cost to public funds of 1,710 young people in Wales going through the new deal only to end up going through the revolving door of benefit dependency?

Mr. Hanson: Some 22,030 young people aged between 18 and 24 have entered the new deal in Wales since its inception, and some 10,109 have secured jobs. That is 10,109 people who have secured jobs that the hon. Gentleman would not have had them secure. He would have had them face further unemployment. The real issue is the cost of unemployment, and how much it cost in the Conservative years. This Government are committed to ensuring that people are in productive, long-term employment, and the new deal is a great contributor to that aim.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): May I ask my hon. Friend the Minister about the plight of disabled people in Wales? How many people with disabilities have been able to take advantage of the new deal and how many have found jobs that are unsubsidised?

Mr. Hanson: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Some 3,416 disabled people have joined the new deal since its inception, and the new deal for disabled people in the eastern valleys pilot area has seen some 221 people secure full-time employment. The new deal is about giving people the opportunity to learn new skills, to have an opportunity to contribute to society and to gain full-time employment. The scheme works for disabled people, young people and older people in the pilot in north-east Wales, and in the extensions announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer—but the Conservative party would scrap it.

Block Grant

3. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): When he last met the First Secretary of the National Assembly to discuss the block grant. [98878]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I meet the Assembly First Secretary on a weekly basis to discuss a range of issues.

Mr. Swayne: Can the Secretary of State tell us how much match funding he has managed to acquire for objective 1 status? Can he assure us that that will have no impact on the block grant?

Mr. Murphy: It is fair to say to the hon. Gentleman that had the matter been left to the previous Government there would have been no objective 1 funding in the first place. It is important to understand that the commitment that was made in getting objective 1 status, which was echoed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when he said that he would not let Wales down, sets the context for our enjoyment of that status.

The hon. Gentleman knows, because it has happened for several years, that all such matters will be taken into account in the comprehensive spending review. However, it is clear that objective 1 status for Wales means that we will go into the next century with a revitalised economy and a reskilled and retrained people.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): When my right hon. Friend discusses the block grant with the First Secretary, will he tell him that I want £25 million of it for my airbus workers, so that we can have a Welsh input into the A3XX project? I would also like my right hon. Friend to say that I need £530 million of repayable launch investment, because that would bring 1,400 jobs to my constituency, which we could share with cross-border communities in Cheshire.

Mr. Murphy: My right hon. Friend has been assiduous in making the case for funding for the new project at Broughton. I visited the plant in his constituency recently, and I understand that it is one of the biggest in the United Kingdom—certainly in Wales—and employs people from both England and Wales. I have met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to discuss the issue and I will discuss it with the First Secretary on Monday next week.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): The Secretary of State will recall that some three weeks ago he gave me an undertaking that he would raise with his Cabinet colleagues the question of the unfairness of the Barnett formula in connection with the division of European structural funds. Does he have an announcement to make on that; and can he apprise the House of the progress he has made on the issue?

Mr. Murphy: I have no announcement to make to the hon. Gentleman or to the House on the issue, because we are in the process of considering the comprehensive spending review for the coming years. However, I repeat what I said in the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs—it is important for everyone to realise that the awarding of objective 1 status to Wales is unique. It was not anticipated when the previous CSR was announced, so the new one will have to take account of the new circumstances.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): When my right hon. Friend next meets the First Secretary, will he raise

with him the issue of that part of the block grant that goes to theatre and education? Will he convey the anger felt by communities throughout Wales that some of the block grant money is being used for a drama strategy that is described by the chairperson of the Arts Council as a tragedy that will harm some of the most deprived communities? Will my right hon. Friend remind the First Secretary that yesterday evening the Welsh parliamentary Labour party demanded an inquiry into the spending of that money?

Mr. Murphy: Like my hon. Friend, I am a Gwent Member of Parliament. I value what the Gwent theatre in education scheme has achieved over many years. My hon. Friend was able to secure an Adjournment debate this morning on the matter, in which he expressed his anger in a robust way, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards). My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary has already taken up the matter and he and I will discuss it with the First Secretary at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The House will have noticed that the Secretary of State ducked the question from my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), so I shall ask him an easier one. He will be aware that, because of the overspending by four local authorities, the Welsh Assembly has put a surcharge on all the other local authorities of between £59 and £79. Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that the block grant is sufficient to meet the needs of local authorities in Wales?

Mr. Murphy: I believe that there is sufficient money in the block grant to meet those needs, but it is not for me to say how the block grant should be shared to meet those needs. I shall raise the point with the First Secretary, but this is essentially a matter for the National Assembly.

Mr. Nigel Evans: The block grant is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Wales. If funds are insufficient to meet local authorities' needs, that would certainly be a matter for him. When the Secretary of State meets the First Secretary, will he apprise him of the fact that the Government of Wales Act 1998 did not give the Welsh Assembly the power to raise taxes? The Assembly does not have the power to impose a fine on every council tax payer of between £59 and £79 to cover the overspending of which all but one of the Labour local authorities in Wales are guilty.

Mr. Murphy: What the Assembly has is the power to distribute the block grant according to the devolution settlement. Devolution means that the Assembly has to take its own decisions. That is what the House—and the people of Wales—voted for.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): When my right hon. Friend next meets the First Secretary, will he stress the importance of the transport element in the block grant? Will he remind the First Secretary and the Transport Secretary in Wales that yesterday the Government and the House expressed their support for the reopening for passengers of the Vale of Glamorgan railway line?

Mr. Murphy: I will certainly convey that good news to the First Secretary.

Beef on the Bone

4. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): What recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary regarding the ban on beef on the bone. [98879]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I met the First Secretary yesterday and high on our agenda was the welcome news that, after the statutory consultation, the ban on beef on the bone is likely to be lifted before Christmas.

That is good news for our Welsh beef industry. The Assembly's Agricultural and Rural Development Committee voted this morning for the lifting of the ban. In addition, I joined my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister this morning in a meeting with representatives of the beef industry, including Welsh farming union leaders. The meeting examined ways in which we can promote the excellence of British—and especially Welsh—beef.

Mr. Robathan: Well, we are all delighted at the lifting of the ludicrous ban on beef on the bone. I cannot hold the Secretary of State responsible for that ban, as he was not in office when it was imposed. However, does he recall that the First Secretary—who was Secretary of State for Wales at the time—famously ate beef on the bone on 1 March this year? The ban has caused enormous losses to Welsh farmers: will the right hon. Gentleman estimate the total cost? Is he aware that it has always been more dangerous for hon. Members to bicycle to the House than to eat beef on the bone?

Mr. Murphy: We must welcome the good news that the Welsh beef industry, and farming in general, has received. The hon. Gentleman knows that the lifting of the ban was based entirely on the scientific and medical evidence.

It is however important that we can tell the world that we are confident our beef can be exported, and that Welsh beef is the choicest, tastiest and safest beef in the world.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a pity that the response of the Conservative party in government was ludicrous when issues were raised about BSE, and that all the suffering of Welsh and British farmers was down to that fundamental error at the end of the 1980s? Can he assure me that the way in which the British Government have ensured that safety is our top priority means that we will now have a successful campaign to sell British beef across the world, and that the Welsh element of that will have a very high profile?

Mr. Murphy: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. He is right to highlight the difficulties that arose because of the BSE crisis. It cost nearly 50 lives and some £4 billion. However, we are out of that crisis. Today's news is good news and I am convinced that the future of the beef industry, particularly in Wales, is bright.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): We welcome the lifting of the beef-on-the-bone ban, but will the Secretary of State say what discussions he has had with the First Secretary regarding the parlous state of Welsh agriculture,

caused by the ban and compounded by the Government's insensitivity to the plight of Welsh farmers and the ineptitude of Welsh Agriculture and Rural Development Secretary, Christine Gwyther? She has lost the confidence of Welsh farmers and been censured by the Welsh Assembly. If she were a Minister in this place, she would resign. Does he agree with the First Secretary about not sacking her? Does he care about Welsh agriculture? He represents the interests of Wales on 21 Cabinet Committees. Why is he on none concerned with agriculture or rural affairs?

Mr. Murphy: The Cabinet Committee on rural affairs essentially concerns England, but I will receive the Cabinet papers. If I think that they or the agenda affect Wales, I will go to the meeting.

On the general point on agriculture in Wales, I would not sack Christine Gwyther, who has done an excellent job. In September, £15 million was given to hill farmers in Wales. Since that decision, £750 million has been identified for calf processing schemes, £350 million has gone to organic aid, £350 million to processes and marketing grants, £50 million to promote the dairy industry, and farming has benefited from £78 million resulting from the deferral of inspection charges. An awful lot of money has gone to Welsh farming since September.

Waiting Lists

5. **Mr. Philip Hammond** (Runnymede and Weybridge): What discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly on the number of people in Wales who are *(a)* on the NHS waiting list for in-patient treatment and *(b)* awaiting a first out-patient consultation. [98880]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I regularly have discussions with the First Secretary and Assembly Health and Social Services Secretary about important matters affecting Wales. That often includes the NHS in Wales and waiting lists have been included in our discussions.

Mr. Hammond: Will the Minister confirm that the number of patients waiting 18 months or longer for in-patient treatment in Wales—under the Government's policy targets, there should be none—has increased by 122 per cent., and the number of patients waiting six months or more for their first out-patient consultation by 430 per cent. since March 1997? Will he further confirm that in the Bro Taf health authority area, 19 per cent. of all patients waiting for in-patient treatment have been waiting for more than 12 months? Does he agree that that represents a disastrous failure of his Government's policy? Will he confirm that there is a terrible crisis in the NHS in Wales and say what he will do to help solve it?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman should be aware—though coming from Runnymede, he may not be—that the Assembly is responsible for the health service in many respects. This is about partnership between central Government and the Assembly. Today, the Assembly Health and Social Services Secretary, Jane Hutt, has announced that 95 per cent. of patients have been admitted to hospital for treatment within 12 months in the past year. Since the Government were elected in May 1997, £291.6 million extra has gone into the NHS in Wales, and in the comprehensive spending review, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced that a further £1 billion will be available for the Assembly to spend over the next three years on health services. Would the hon. Gentleman cancel that money? Would he have put it in? The answers to those questions are yes and no.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): As my hon. Friend knows, when health funding is calculated in England, an assessment of deprivation is made. When will deprivation be included in an assessment for health funding in Wales by the Welsh Assembly?

Mr. Hanson: The point that my hon. Friend has mentioned is valid. I hope that the Assembly will take the matter on board. I shall certainly raise it with the Assembly Secretary, Jane Hutt, but ultimately it is for the Assembly to determine.

Small Businesses

6. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): When he last met the First Secretary to discuss assistance for small businesses in Wales. [98881]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have regular meetings with the First Secretary and discuss a wide range of issues, including assistance to small businesses in Wales.

Mr. Loughton: That is all very interesting, but did the First Secretary think that small businesses in Wales had been helped or hindered by the £30 billion of new business taxes introduced by the Labour Government?

Mr. Murphy: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that what is important in Wales today is that the Welsh Federation of Small Businesses has announced that it has confidence in the way in which our Government are running the economy, that small businesses in Wales are more optimistic than ever about their future, and that 25 per cent. have increased their work force.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the best things for developing small businesses in Wales would be the establishment of a development bank for Wales, as called for by the Federation of Small Businesses as well as, of course, Plaid Cymru. Will he give us an assurance that the objective 1 money for Wales, which can be used on a 7 per cent. basis ahead of demand, can in part be made available for such a development bank so that small businesses get the aid that they so clearly need?

Mr. Murphy: I take the point made by the right hon. Gentleman, but I am careful not to commit the National Assembly for Wales, of which he is a Member, to any policies. I agree with the thrust of his comments. As he knows, an innovations fund with £5 million of venture capital was announced in Cardiff by the Welsh Development Agency and National Westminster bank.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Small businesses feel that they have not been sufficiently

consulted about objective 1 and 2 status funding. Is the Secretary of State willing to consider further consultation with small businesses to ensure that they can make their creative views known to him?

Mr. Murphy: As I told the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), the matter that the hon. Gentleman raises is essentially for the Assembly, but I shall convey his views to the First Secretary.

Child Poverty

7. **Mr. Alan W. Williams** (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): What representations he has received concerning the problem of child poverty in Wales. [98882]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I regularly discuss this issue with colleagues and the appropriate Assembly Secretary to ensure that we are working together to achieve the Government's target of ending child poverty in Wales within 20 years. I am pleased to note that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security is in Cardiff today to meet the First Secretary and to invite the Assembly to take part in a joint ministerial group on tackling child poverty.

Mr. Williams: Does my hon. Friend agree that most of the poorest families in Wales have young children? The working families tax credit will be a massive help, but so far only half the 2,000 families entitled to it in my constituency have applied. Will he arrange that, wherever Father Christmas goes in the next few weeks, he will take with him a bunch of leaflets explaining the credit?

Mr. Hanson: The working families tax credit is an important part of the Government's overall strategy on tackling child poverty. In Wales, some 65,000 people could benefit from it. Take-up is one of the important issues that we need to face. The important thing about the working families tax credit is not just that the Government have provided it but that the Opposition voted against it.

Pre-Budget Statement

8. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones** (Cardiff, Central): If he has met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the impact on Wales of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's pre-Budget statement. [98884]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I meet the Assembly First Secretary on a weekly basis to discuss a range of issues.

Mr. Jones: When the Secretary of State next meets the Chancellor, will he convey to him my encouragement for his bold ambition to achieve full employment? Will he tell him that his policies have already created in my constituency a 78 per cent. reduction in youth unemployment and a 57 per cent. reduction in long-term unemployment? Those are important steps; but does he share my concern that a whole generation have lost their most valuable productive years through living under a Conservative Government who did not share that ambition?

Mr. Murphy: Of course I agree with my hon. Friend. The next time I meet my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, I shall let him know that the people of Wales believe that his policies of fairness, stability and enterprise are paying off in Wales, and that his policies are right for us in Wales. I shall also be able to tell him and the people of Wales that, since May 1997, total unemployment in Wales has fallen from a little more than 80,000 to a little less than 60,000; that is progress in anybody's language.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [98906] **Dan Norris** (Wansdyke): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 1 December.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Dan Norris: By any standards, this has been a truly momentous week in the history of Northern Ireland. Will the House join me in paying tribute to the hard work and courage shown by politicians—especially the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)—and everyone else in Northern Ireland?

Will my right hon. Friend join me in saying that it is incumbent on all those currently involved in the Northern Ireland peace process to ensure that they continue to show that courage, and that they carry on their tireless work so that the best possible opportunity for peace in a generation can properly be grasped and turned into reality?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm that this afternoon the Queen made the order that devolves powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly from midnight tonight. That will create the first Government in about 25 years who are directly accountable to the people of Northern Ireland. It will come alongside the creation of new north-south institutions, changes to the Irish constitution, the dropping of the territorial claim to the north and the appointment by the IRA of an authorised representative to discuss the modalities of decommissioning with the Independent Commission on Decommissioning. I pay tribute to the leader of the Ulster Unionists, the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), and to all those in Northern Ireland who have had the courage to drive the process forward. There will be many difficulties on the way to the achievement of a lasting peace in Northern Ireland, but I believe that one huge, giant step forward has been taken.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): May I concur with the sentiments and hopes expressed by the Prime Minister? I congratulate all those involved and I thank the

hon. Member for Wansdyke (Dan Norris) for his remarks about my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

On a different subject, today, the Audit Commission described benefit fraud as a serious and growing concern, and stated that progress in dealing with it has been "disappointingly slow". Is not it time that the Government introduced new proposals, including the Opposition's proposal to give benefit fraud officers and inspectors the same powers as those held by tax inspectors?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we have introduced further powers to tackle benefit fraud—and, indeed, tax fraud. I agree that we must be vigilant at all times in respect of those matters. However, at the same time as we are cracking down on the abuses and the fraud, it is important to ensure that we provide opportunities for people—especially the young unemployed. That is why it is important that, while we are tightening up the benefit system, we are also introducing the new deal to give those young people hope.

Mr. Hague: I am asking a specific question about what will be done about benefit fraud. If the Prime Minister thinks that the problem is currently being tackled by the Government, he is not living in the real world. The National Audit Office pointed out that there is no evidence of any improvement in stemming losses. This morning's Audit Commission report states that substantial work is needed to tackle fraud more effectively.

Does the Prime Minister know of any reason why he should not adopt our proposal to give benefit fraud officers the same powers as tax inspectors—to search premises, to investigate accounts and to collect information? That would show that we are prepared to bring the full force of the law against those who cheat the taxpayer?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we should use the full force of the law to defeat those who are engaged in benefit fraud. Last year, we saved about £200 million in income support alone. During the course of a Parliament, that would add up to a saving of £1 billion *[Interruption.]* Before Opposition Members shout about this, they should remember that they were in power for 18 years and faced the same problem. However, I agree that we should constantly look at ways that we can improve the service, which is why we have taken some seven or eight different measures to tackle benefit fraud since we came to office. But of course we shall always carry on looking for more and better ways of doing it.

Mr. Hague: It is no good for the right hon. Gentleman just to say that he is considering various options. That is what he has been saying to job applicants from the Liberal party for years, and nothing happened. He says these things, but nothing is done.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who used to be Minister for Welfare Reform, said earlier this year—*[Interruption.]* It is no good for hon. Members to shout about it. Billions of pounds of taxpayers' money are at stake, spent on the authority of this House. The right hon. Gentleman says:

"Taxpayers have every right to feel genuinely angry about the Government's inability to tackle benefit fraud. Talking about tackling the problem is not enough."

That is the comment from the Labour Benches.

Will the Prime Minister adopt the following proposal—tougher penalties for people who deliberately defraud the system, including community service sentences on top of existing penalties?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman said that we were not taking any measures. We are of course taking measures. We have invested an extra £100 million in checks on housing benefit claims. We have extended, for example—*[Interruption.]* Conservative Members asked for measures; I am just telling them what they are. Section 19 of the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997 has been extended to housing benefit from September this year. The benefit fraud inspectorate has been beefed up and changed, and can now play a far greater role in ensuring better standards in the tackling of benefit fraud.

As a result of the measures that we have taken, total social security spending is actually falling in the areas of economic and social failure, for the first time in decades. Under the last Government, of whom the right hon. Gentleman was a member, the social security budget rose by 4 per cent. in real terms every year. By contrast, it is now rising by only 1 per cent. in real terms. That is due to the measures on child benefit, working families tax credit and pensioners, and it is deliberate. Tackling fraud is one part of it; the other part is reforming welfare, which, after 18 years during which Conservative Governments did nothing, we are finally tackling.

Mr. Hague: The right hon. Gentleman attacks the last Government, but the last Government had "spotlight on benefit cheats" campaigns that saved tens of millions of pounds, which the present Government have abandoned. The last Government introduced new penalties to make them available to local authorities, which have now not been implemented.

The right hon. Gentleman is not answering the questions that I am putting to him today. I am asking about false claims. Anyone would think that that was his strong subject, after most of his answers in recent months. Is he aware, from today's report, that 40 per cent. of councils do not even require applicants to give their national insurance number on their application for benefit? So will he adopt this common-sense proposal—*[Interruption.]* A common-sense proposal—he is allowed to adopt common-sense proposals. Will he oblige all local authorities to ask for national insurance numbers on benefit claims?

The Prime Minister: I am totally happy to consider all those measures, but I emphasise to the right hon. Gentleman, as I have been trying to tell him in my answers, that we are taking a series of measures, which we believe are the most effective measures, to root out fraud.

Anyone would think that this issue had just arisen in the last two years. It was there under the Government of whom the right hon. Gentleman was a part. We are actually tackling the problem. For the first time, for example, all local authorities must abide by the same rules in rooting out benefit fraud. That was never done under the Conservative Government.

I return to the point that I notice that the right hon. Gentleman has not denied, which is that, under the last Government in the last Parliament, social security spending was rising by 4 per cent. in real terms every year, and now it is falling in the areas of economic and social failure. That is the biggest saving for the taxpayer that we could have.

Mr. Hague: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the rules applying to local authorities, but today's report clearly says, on page 23:

"At present, only one in five councils is actually following the rules."

I am simply suggesting to the right hon. Gentleman how to make local authorities follow the rules. The truth is that he has not tackled the issue because he will not tackle Labour local authorities that are not fighting fraud.

Millions of people work hard and pay ever higher taxes under the present Government. Billions of pounds of their money are being fraudulently taken away. Is it not the case that if the right hon. Gentleman is not prepared to give fraud inspectors the powers that we have talked about and toughen penalties and require local authorities to deal with the problem, he will have gone on talking about this issue but not dealing with it?

The Prime Minister: We are of course dealing with it. As ever, the right hon. Gentleman is quick with his jokes, but less quick with his judgment. If he looks at the measures that we have taken, he will see that they compare very well with the measures that were taken under the previous Government. However, I agree: we must always look at how we can do more. However, in taking more measures, it is important to tackle benefit fraud, but, at the same time, we are encouraging people to get off benefit and into work, because that is the single, biggest element of fraud.

Under the previous Government, we know what we ended up with—one in five non-pensioner households with nobody working at all. The new deal has put 150,000 young people alone into work and the economic policies of the Government have cut unemployment with 700,000 extra jobs now in the economy. Of course, we must deal with the fraud aspect, and we are doing it a darned sight better than the right hon. Gentleman's Government ever did. However, we will not tackle that side of the problem properly unless we also grant people opportunity, which is what we are doing. His policy—by getting rid of the new deal, abolishing the working families tax credit and pursuing measures that would push up unemployment—has the opposite effect.

Mr. David Stewart (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): The Prime Minister will be aware that, this week in my constituency, 3,000 workers lost their jobs in the Barmac fabrication yard, which is a tragedy for the work force and for the families facing a bleak Christmas without a wage or any earnings. Will he urge the key oil companies—British Petroleum, Shell and Texaco—to bring forward their exploration work in the North sea and provide my constituents with a new year full of hope rather than despair?

The Prime Minister: There is obviously a limit to what we can do because of the situation in which we find ourselves with the maturing of the United Kingdom's oil and gas fields which has caused the downturn in fabrication work and with the 1998 collapse in world oil prices. However, we can try to put all the main bodies together, which we are doing in the oil and gas industry task force. We are looking now at how we can develop the right initiatives to protect the livelihoods and jobs of people in the position of my hon. Friend's constituents. I know the concern about this. We believe that the task force will be able to bring forward proposals that will help such people, though I again have to say that there will be a limit to what we can do given the state of the market.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): I assure the Prime Minister that the only Opposition party leader worried about a job application should be the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). It arrived from Kensington and Chelsea yesterday afternoon and gift wrapped in time for Christmas.

May I return to the exchanges with the Prime Minister last week about policy for the tube in which he dismissed our policy of a bond issue, which would save £150 for every Londoner? He also said that such a policy had bankrupt New York, but a senior former official in New York described that statement as a complete and utter untruth. Will he justify his policy by means of genuine argument and not by inaccurate rubbishing of international comparisons?

The Prime Minister: I did not say that; I said that New York had gone bankrupt. The bonds were issued not by New York, but by the state government, and they are another matter altogether. If the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting, as I doubt he is, that central Government issue bonds for the London underground, he will have a lot of explaining to do in the course of the election campaign.

There are three alternatives. The first is the Conservative proposal that was confirmed again last week by the shadow Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), which is to privatise the entirety of the tube. The second is the proposal of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) for bonds, but to keep everything in the public sector. That would mean that we would not get the construction work done on cost and to time. The best way—*[Interruption.]* I am capable of doing my own publicity for that.

The best way is to have the public sector do what it does best—run the trains and the underground and be responsible for safety and for drivers—and have the private sector come in to do the construction work needed by the tube. The alternative is to leave everything in the public sector, including the construction work. We would be back in the position that we faced with the Jubilee line, which overran by £1.4 billion and came in almost two years late. That would not save people in London money; it would cost them money.

Mr. Kennedy: But only last week, our mutual friend was telling me that his policy would get the tube completed on time. Seven days later, what has happened? Railtrack has been deemed unable to submit a bid; the Deputy Prime Minister is performing a U-turn; there are further delays to tube improvement, and the

Government's policy is completely off the rails. Will not the Prime Minister admit that, in seven parliamentary days, his policy has gone from rolling stock to laughing stock?

The Prime Minister: We have had one Leader of the Opposition's top 10 jokes, and we do not need another from the right hon. Gentleman.

The policy that the right hon. Gentleman is putting forward does not answer my key point. Under that policy, the construction work of the tube would be left in the public sector. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Yes, it would. I had better explain the Liberal Democrats' policy to them. Their policy is to construct the London underground through bonds. Yes? Which are issued by London— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. This is not a free-for-all. The Prime Minister is at the Dispatch Box.

The Prime Minister: That policy certainly would not be free for Londoners, and everything would stay in the public sector. If the right hon. Gentleman considers what has happened with the Jubilee line, he will realise the dangers of having that construction work in the public sector. The best way is to let the public sector do what it does well, but get the private sector to do the construction work, which means that the private sector carries the risk and we get the work completed on time and to cost. That is the sensible way, rather than privatising everything or keeping everything as it is, because those two alternatives do not work.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): I welcome very much the Prime Minister's decision to have a review of the Government's policies on the north-south divide, which I know will be much appreciated in the north-west. However, as well as reviewing the Barnett formula in that process, will he encourage my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister to consider ways in which we can imaginatively use brownfield sites to bring housing back into our inner cities? I am thinking particularly of ways in which small and medium businesses could be allowed, with concessions, to renovate for housing the areas above their shops.

The Prime Minister: It is precisely for that reason that when we came to office we raised the amount of building that had to be done on brownfield sites. We have increased it from the previous Government's figure of about 40 per cent. of new housing and set a target of 60 per cent. We have also increased the amount of greenbelt land. We have to make sure also that we get the right balance in housebuilding in the south, which is why we are now studying the independent report that we have been given.

There is a real sense in which we have to make sure that the future of our regions is a planned future. Another measure that will help is the regional development agencies, which will be set up throughout the country. Another point that people should note about the shadow Environment Secretary is that last week he gave a firm commitment on behalf of the Conservative party that he would abolish every regional development agency. That is something that we will be reminding him about closer to the election.

Q2. [98907] **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): Is the Prime Minister aware that all Staffordshire Members of Parliament had a crisis meeting with our chief constable yesterday? Is he aware that after using all reserves and the maximum available council tax, and following the most recent financial settlement, which was announced by the Home Secretary only a few days ago, the chief constable is having to dissolve the rural crime unit and disband 250 men and women from the service, including 165 front-line police officers? Is he aware that that is happening up and down the land? My specific question for the Prime Minister is, does he agree that fewer policemen equals less crime prevention and less crime detection?

The Prime Minister: That is the reason we are recruiting more officers, after years of falling numbers under the Conservatives. Because the hon. Gentleman raised the same matter the last time he questioned me in the House, I looked up the numbers, and I do not really understand his point. The Staffordshire constabulary had more officers at the end of March 1999 than in March 1997; crime in Staffordshire fell in the 12 months to March 1999; and the funding for Staffordshire constabulary will increase by more than the national average, at 3.3 per cent. In its recent report on Staffordshire, the inspectorate of constabulary said:

"The force can justifiably be proud of the continuous improvement it has made in an area of crime that is of major concern to many communities."

That is a good write-up.

The figures do not appear to accord with the hon. Gentleman's words. I shall, of course, look into the matter, but must point out that, if we compare the funding that we are giving to police services throughout this country with the funding set out in the previous Conservative Government's plans, we find that we are increasing the amount of funding over and above the Conservative plans. That is true, not only in the area of crime, but in schools and hospitals. The one set of people that is not entitled to complain is comprised of Conservative Members of Parliament who supported the previous Government.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Is the Prime Minister ready to disclose to the House the nature of the discussions he has had with Liberal leaders about their relations? Did they include discussions about a coalition, the possibility of appointing Liberal Members to the Cabinet, or the long-term desirability of a coalition? His answer has a considerable bearing both on the balance within the House and on electors when they come to make up their mind as to the meaning of their vote in any future general election.

The Prime Minister: The answer is, no, I do not intend to disclose the contents of private conversations. However, my right hon. Friend can look at my Cabinet and see that there are no Liberal Democrat members of it, as far as I am aware.

Q3. [98908] **Mr. Lembit Öpik** (Montgomeryshire): Today is world AIDS day. Does the Prime Minister agree

that few of us realise the true scale of the HIV epidemic, with up to one in four adults HIV positive in some parts of the developing world? Is he aware that, in 1998, the United Kingdom recorded the highest number in its history of HIV sufferers diagnosed in one year? Will he make the fight against AIDS, both in the UK and abroad, a Government and a personal priority?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important subject. In this country, there are more than 18,000 people—a larger number than most people realise—living with HIV-AIDS and receiving treatment from the national health service. We are spending £234 million on treatment. Internationally, we are leading on the issue and we are contributing to the effort to find a vaccine. At the Commonwealth conference in Durban, I announced a contribution of £14 million to the international AIDS vaccine initiative; thus, we are the first Government to donate to that initiative.

Of those with HIV, 95 per cent. live in developing countries. In some of those countries, life expectancy has fallen from the mid-60s to the mid-40s. We have to tackle the problem, not only through international support, but through education. With the Department for International Development, we are working hard in those countries to break down taboos about talking about the issues. In that way, we can get education programmes in place, and funding should then follow.

Q4. [98909] **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that support for the working families tax credit and the minimum wage comes from those who benefit from them and from the vast majority of people who support a fair and just society?

The Prime Minister: I believe that the vast majority of people support the minimum wage and the working families tax credit because they are making work pay. One of the reasons why we have managed to reduce unemployment and to increase employment while keeping inflation under control is that we have reformed the tax and benefit system and made work pay. That is why it would be a tragedy if the Conservative party were returned to government. It is pledged to scrap both the minimum wage—it confirmed that again last week—and the working families tax credit. Its return would mean millions of low-income families having their income cut. I cannot think of anything more regressive and foolish.

Q5. [98910] **Mr. Philip Hammond** (Runnymede and Weybridge): This time last week the Prime Minister confirmed to my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) that the guarantee of the Secretary of State for Health that no one will be denied the drugs that he or she needs remains valid. In the light of that, is the right hon. Gentleman aware that tomorrow his Government, notwithstanding the assurances that were given when the National Institute of Clinical Excellence was set up, will attempt to impose by regulation a change in the constitution of that body so that it not only promotes clinical excellence, which is its ostensible function, but explicitly takes into account available resources in doing so? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that that is tantamount to confirmation that patients will be denied drugs that they need on the ground of cost, and that the Secretary of State's guarantee is worthless?

The Prime Minister: The idea that the institute should not take into account cost effectiveness is absurd. Of course it should do that. The Conservative party's approach to this issue is one of complete hypocrisy. I shall give the hon. Gentleman three facts. First, we are increasing spending on drugs in the national health service by about 8 per cent. a year. Secondly, for the first time, NHS spending as a proportion of national income under this Government will rise by more than 6 per cent. Thirdly, the additional money that we are putting into the health service—far more money than was ever promised by the Conservative Government—is opposed by the hon. Gentleman's party as reckless and irresponsible. Again, the one group that should not complain is that of Conservative Members, whose answer to the problem of the health service is to privatise a large part of it.

Q6. [98911] **Mr. Brian White** (Milton Keynes, North-East): Given that certain countries in Seattle are trying to limit the agenda of the World Trade Organisation talks, will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the British delegation will push for the widest possible discussion so that our objectives of protecting the environment, recognising fair employment laws and tackling world poverty can be achieved?

The Prime Minister: At Seattle we shall be pushing for free trade because we believe that that is in the interests of the entire world. It is particularly in the interests of the developing world. We are in favour of good labour practices and high environmental standards, but we must ensure that all these things are conducted in such a way that they do not become a back-door form of protectionism, which would be wrong for developing countries.

In addition, as a result of the initiative on third world debt, 38 of the world's poorest nations will have their debt cut by $100 billion. That has been pioneered by my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for International Development. It is something of which this country can be justly proud.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): As a man who fully intends to live with his cancer rather than let it kill him, I have a vested interest in the answer to this question. Is the Prime Minister aware of the enormous discrepancy between the amount of money that is being poured into the cancer that kills most women and the trickle of money that is going into the cancer that kills

most men, namely prostate cancer? Will the right hon. Gentleman give an assurance that he will keep the matter under review and secure the necessary funding so that the next generation may be at less risk.

The Prime Minister: That is a perfectly fair point. It is true that we have put more money into breast cancer. We are going to move on to other cancer areas, including prostate cancer. By December 2000 all urgent GP referrals will be seen by a consultant within two weeks. I know that there is still a very long way to go but we will get there. I hope that if we continue with the prudent management of the economy, the three-year good spending round that we have had for this financial year and the next two financial years can be carried on in the later three-year period.

Q7. [98912] **Jane Griffiths** (Reading, East): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Women's National Commission on its 30 years of work to ensure that the voices of women are heard in government, and in particular on its recent work to end the conspiracy of silence surrounding domestic violence?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to congratulate the Women's National Commission on its sterling work over the past 30 years. We recently published a document on domestic violence, and we are giving a great deal of support to women through the first steps national child care strategy, the biggest ever rise in child benefit, the working families tax credit, and extra cash for cervical screening and breast cancer treatment. We are providing support for part-time workers and support through the minimum wage. We are giving many women the chance of paid holiday for the first time in years. Those measures have two things in common: they were all introduced by a Labour Government, and they would all be abolished by a Tory Government.

Wembley Stadium

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the future of Wembley stadium.

Wembley stadium is synonymous with the best of British sport, and has been the stage for some of this country's greatest sporting achievements. Our aims for the new national stadium that we all want to see at Wembley are to ensure that we have a world-class sporting venue that is ready to seize the opportunities of the new century, and to provide a fitting centrepiece to England's hosting of the FIFA world cup in 2006.

It has hitherto been the desire of this Administration—and, indeed, of the previous Government—that England should have a stadium able to stage a wide range of the world's major sporting events. As the House knows from previous debates and questions, the consistent aim has been to design a new national stadium that can stage the premier events of football, rugby and athletics. Sport England has provided £120 million of national lottery funds to secure that aim.

The design proposals for the new stadium were launched by Wembley National Stadium Ltd. on 29 July this year. The design was for the construction of a stadium laid out for football and rugby, which was, we were assured, capable of conversion into athletics mode for staging both the world athletics championships and a future Olympic games. The designers had come up with a novel solution for meeting the conflicting demands of athletics on the one hand, and football and rugby on the other, by proposing the construction of a concrete deck on which the athletics track could be laid for the holding of an athletics event.

I have to tell the House that, at the time, I was concerned about the viability of the proposed solution, not least because of the length of time—six months or more—that would be involved in the construction and subsequent removal of the deck on any occasion on which it was required. Following the 29 July launch, I therefore asked Wembley National Stadium Ltd. to work up its proposals in more detail and to present them to the British Olympic Association for comment. Following that presentation, which took place on 6 October, the BOA voiced a number of continuing concerns.

As a result of that, my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport called a meeting of all interested parties on 19 October to discuss the project. Those discussions did not satisfactorily resolve the outstanding issues, so my hon. Friend asked UK Sport to commission an independent report on the technical merits of the Wembley National Stadium Ltd. proposals. That report has been prepared by sports architecture expert consultants DLA Ellerbe Becket, and we received it on Monday of this week. I am placing a copy in the Library of the House this afternoon.

I have to tell the House that the report raises serious doubts about the viability of the stadium design for international athletics events. In any likely configuration, the sightlines for large numbers of spectators would be poor, and in some cases could fail Olympic requirements; the seating space for individual spectators would be far from ideal; the roof would cover some lanes of the track and not others; there would be no portal for people and equipment to gain access to the deck; the east-west alignment of the track would be detrimental to athletes; and, for any Olympic games, the deck would have to be constructed and in place for at least a year in advance, which could render the stadium unusable for international standard football for more than two years.

My reluctant conclusion from the Ellerbe Becket report is that the stadium as designed—or in any similar configuration—cannot readily provide the central venue for an Olympic games bid for London. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that it could provide an appropriate venue for the world athletics championships, for which we hope to bid in 2005. It will, however, be able to provide the best venue in the world for the 2006 football world cup.

I am, of course, anxious to give Wembley National Stadium Ltd. and Sport England the opportunity to address the concerns raised by Ellerbe Becket. We should bear in mind that it was a policy requirement of the lottery grant from Sport England that the national stadium should be capable of hosting—or of being adapted to host—both the world athletics championships and the Olympic games, as well as football and rugby league events. Therefore, I have asked both Wembley National Stadium Ltd. and Sport England to report to me by 15 December with any solutions they are able to propose in response to the report. I have also, separately, asked my officials to undertake a thorough analysis of the process of decision making by all parties up to this point.

I am keen not to lose valuable time. Therefore, my hon Friend the Minister and I will begin immediately to discuss with Sport England, UK Sport, UK Athletics and the BOA, other non-Wembley alternatives for staging international athletics events. It may well be that such a cost-effective solution can be found. My officials will also take forward parallel discussions with Sport England, Wembley National Stadium Ltd. and the Football Association on whether and how the current lottery funding agreement might need to be modified if the new Wembley stadium concentrates simply on its primary role as a venue for football and rugby.

I should like to make it absolutely clear to the House and, indeed, to the world in general, that the concerns raised by Ellerbe Becket relate solely to the suitability of the current design for athletics. There is no question of the new Wembley stadium not being at the heart of England's staging of the 2006 FIFA world cup. I continue to believe that the world cup bid is strong, and we will do everything we can to help it to succeed.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for his courtesy in giving me notice of its sad and disappointing content. The House is united in its support for the development of a world-class national stadium at Wembley, which is recognised around the world as a symbol of sporting excellence and the home of football.

The redevelopment of Wembley has the capacity to act as a focal point for efforts to host major international events. It can also benefit the local environment and regeneration in that part of the capital. However, there is widespread and understandable dismay at the way in which that important national project has been mishandled. Nothing that the Secretary of State has said today will dispel that dismay.

[Mr. Peter Ainsworth]

The process has dragged on for five years. The original hope—endorsed by the Government as recently as April this year—for the 2003 world athletics championships to be the first major event at the stadium has proved wildly optimistic. Most recently, concern has focused on whether the design of the stadium would be up to the job of hosting an Olympic games. These are not new concerns. The Select Committee raised serious doubts in its report in May this year. It also criticised the

"apparent lack of strategic thinking in the approach to this project by the English Sports Council and the Government."

Why has it taken the Secretary of State so long to respond? Can he confirm that the British Olympic Association wrote to the chief executive of Sport England as long ago as January 1998, seeking to ascertain what thought had been given to the suitability of the venue for hosting the Olympics, and pointing out that no one had sought its views? Can he also confirm that the BOA contacted officials in his Department in March 1998 to set out its concerns, which were repeated in May, July and November 1998 and May, June, July and October this year? Can he explain why his own statements and departmental press releases have repeatedly referred to the ability to host the Olympics when he must have known that the BOA's view was that the stadium was not up to scratch?

The Secretary of State has told that House that he became concerned on 29 July this year, at the launch of the project—yet at that time he issued a press release describing the design as "stunning". What is stunning is today's announcement of further delay. Will he confirm that, although the International Olympic Committee has no specific requirements as to a minimum capacity for opening and closing ceremonies, it has stated that capacity should be about

"75,000 to 80,000 to be considered adequate"?

Is it surprising that, with all the delay and uncertainty, City investors have begun to feel nervous about supporting the project? He will know that its cost has risen in recent months from £320 million to £475 million, making it the most expensive project of its kind ever contemplated.

Why did the Minister for Sport—who sits there demurely and slightly sheepishly, next to the Secretary of State—wait until the day that the planning application was lodged before letting it be known that she was unhappy with it? She was reported at the time as saying that it was the "wrong kind of stadium". Was not that grossly irresponsible? Does not the Secretary of State face an invidious position that is entirely of his Government's making? Further delay will cost money and confidence and run the risk of undermining our bid to host the 2006 world cup. On the other hand, to proceed to develop a national stadium that is incapable of hosting an Olympic games would be a tragic missed opportunity. How many chances will this country get to build a truly national stadium?

Conservative Members wish the project well and we hope that it will succeed, but can we be assured that there will be no more ministerial incompetence, bickering, interference and failed communications? The sum of today's announcement reflects dither, delay and incompetence, and those have become the Secretary of State's defining characteristics. I offer him three words of advice: get a grip.

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman said that Conservative Members wish the project well, but it was difficult to discern that in his questions. He asked a number of specific questions to which I shall respond. He said that the BOA had written at the start of January and on a number of subsequent occasions to Sport England and to my Department about its concerns. That is the case, and my Department responded similarly on a number of occasions. On 28 May, 2 July and 21 July 1998, and 12 January 1999, my Department had meetings or correspondence with the Sports Council and others, specifically identifying the concerns that the BOA had raised. What the BOA was questioning was the suitability of the stadium for the hosting of a potential Olympic bid.

Everyone involved in the project at that stage consistently assured us—the BOA and Government—that there would be no difficulty in ensuring that such an athletics event could indeed be hosted in an adapted stadium. That assurance was brought into question only when we saw the detailed designs for the first time, in the middle of July this year. As soon as I had seen them I called a meeting for 21 July, at which I made it clear that I was concerned about the particular proposals that were being adopted for the transforming of the stadium into athletics mode. Subsequently, we have asked for further detail, and analysed it together with the BOA. Because the answers were not fully satisfactory, we did what I believe was absolutely the right thing and appointed a distinguished group of outside non-partisan experts to have a look at the detailed design and advise us. That advice came to us on Monday of this week, and we have placed it in the House today, Wednesday.

I can tell the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) that yes, we want to avoid further delay; yes, we want to ensure that Wembley can be the centrepiece of our bid for the FIFA world cup in 2006; but yes, we also want to get it right for athletics. Getting it right for athletics does not necessarily mean the current design, nor does it necessarily mean insisting that football and athletics share the same national stadium. That is an issue that we will now examine urgently.

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Government are not putting a single pound into the project, apart from the £120 million of lottery money that has just paid for the site? All the rest must be raised from the City, or from the football authorities.

Is my right hon. Friend also aware that stadiums in Cardiff, Paris and Berlin, and, for instance, Hampden Park, have cost about £100 million, while a figure of £400-odd million is already being mentioned in connection with the new Wembley stadium? Surely it would be better to keep the existing Wembley stadium, renovate it for the purpose of either athletics or football, and then put a separate stadium for either football or athletics beside the Dome, where there is ample room. That is still a brownfield site.

Yesterday, an all-party group met the International Olympic Committee, and last night we met officials from Wembley. It seemed to us that there was very little chance of both sides agreeing, and that we would end up with a

camel designed by a committee that had been trying to design a horse. As has been the case for 70 years, the fans inside the stadium will not have a proper view; they will have to stand up to see across to the far side. It will be a disaster, and we and the public auditor will probably have to become involved because of the involvement of, for instance, Brent council.

It is too late to start again, but it is not too late to keep the existing Wembley stadium for either football or athletics and to build a new one beside the Dome.

Mr. Smith: I fear that the existing Wembley stadium is beginning to show its age. If we are serious about wanting to make a substantial bid to host the world cup in 2006, I do not believe that basing it on the existing stadium would necessarily be the best proposition. My hon. Friend is, however, correct in saying that the £120 million that Sport England intends to put into the new Wembley stadium is money from the national lottery, not from the Exchequer.

We must ensure that when Sport England is making difficult decisions about the deployment of lottery money, it weighs up the interests of the different sports of which they must take account. One consideration that we must bear in mind, in the light of the current proposal to insert a deck in the stadium to host athletics, is the sheer cost involved. That money might be better deployed in another way to secure a proper athletics venue.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Does the Secretary of State accept that it could be argued that the performance to date in this particular game has not been wonderful, but that it is far more useful to concentrate on winning than wondering why we might have failed so far? Given that, I want to ask him a couple of specific questions.

Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that, whatever happens, we will have a replacement for the Wembley stadium? I disagree with the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton)—the existing stadium is clearly not up to a bid for world cup football in 2006. Will the right hon. Gentleman ensure that that will be the first objective and that we achieve it?

Will the Secretary of State confirm that if it is possible to come up with a stadium that both fulfils the time constraints for the 2006 football bid and could be enlarged to include athletics and other sports, then, and only then, will such a stadium be considered? Does he feel that the experience in Spain with the Barcelona stadium, in Cardiff with the stadium for the rugby world cup, and with many other stadiums, has led the world of professional sport to conclude that it is better for stadiums that can be used for football and other ball games to be separate from stadiums that can be used for all other sports?

If it is better to have a football stadium at Wembley and a stadium for international athletics, Commonwealth and Olympic games somewhere else, let us do both and not waste money delaying the first and achieving neither.

Mr. Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the constructive way in which he has approached the issue. His forward-looking remarks contrast sharply with the backward-looking remarks of the official Opposition spokesman.

My aim is to ensure that, whatever happens, we have a world-class replacement for the existing Wembley stadium that can act as the centrepiece of our 2006 football world cup bid. That is an absolute aim that must be met.

Is it possible to have a stadium that does both? The answer is yes, in theory, but a perfect athletics stadium is far from perfect for football and rugby, and vice versa. What can be achieved, as the Stade de France in Paris showed, is a compromise between the two—a stadium that allows the space that is needed for athletics events, but at the same time can be used extremely happily for football. However, spectators are much more distant from the pitch than they would be in an ideal football configuration. We are talking about two different animals: one that is good for football, the other that is good for athletics. The two do not necessarily match.

The DLA Ellerbe Becket report identifies that the current solution that Wembley National Stadium Ltd. has come up with does not work particularly well. What we need to do now—I have put the work urgently in hand—is to analyse whether a Stade de France-type solution will work at Wembley; whether the timing of any such solution would endanger our 2006 bid, which we do not want; and whether we need to look at something completely different, which keeps Wembley for football and rugby league and provides a stadium somewhere else for athletics.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Does my right hon. Friend recall the response by the former Minister of Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), to my question:

"what discussions have taken place between representatives of the Sports Council and the British Athletics Federation about the need for an athletics track as part of the new English National Stadium at Wembley"?

He replied:

"The British Athletics Federation were fully involved in the selection process for the National Stadium and in defining the requirements for the project. Further discussions with the athletics governing body will take place as the design brief is prepared to discuss proposals for athletics facilities."—[*Official Report*, 10 July 1998; Vol. 315, c. 661-62W.]

In the light of that, will my right hon. Friend pursue with Sport England, which was responsible at that stage for the integration of the facilities, the reason why such involvement and discussions clearly did not take place about the design brief? I understand the Government's dilemma. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) said, they have the project at arm's length and have no financial involvement, so it is difficult for them to have the influence at all stages that they might wish.

I tabled a further written question—

Madam Speaker: Order. Other hon. Members want to ask questions. This is an inordinately long question. We are almost having a debate. Please put the question directly.

Mr. Gardiner: The former Minister for Sport said:

"In the event of a breach of the conditions of the Lottery award, the ESC has to right to seek repayment".—[*Official Report*, 3 December 1998; Vol. 321, c. 235W.]

[Mr. Gardiner]

Will my right hon. Friend be looking into that to ensure that athletics receives a share of the £120 million, as was planned, and that the Football Association uses that money to contribute to the restructuring of the area under section 146 agreements?

Mr. Smith: I touched on both my hon. Friend's central points in my statement. I have asked my officials to undertake a thorough analysis of the process of decision making that has brought us to this position. The national lottery funding agreement might well need to be modified if what we end up with is not that which was specified in the original agreement. To be fair to Sport England, none of the bodies concerned was able to address the specific difficulties of putting an athletics mode into the stadium until we saw the detailed stadium designs in July this year. Since then, we have put the necessary work in hand to ensure that we get the right answers.

My aim is to ensure that we get a grip on the project, make decisions in the next two to three weeks on how we will take it forward, and then get on and do it.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): The Secretary of State will recall that I raised concerns about Wembley at Culture, Media and Sport questions on Monday of last week. My fellow officers of the all-party sports group and I are among the many who have been concerned about the subject for some time. The right hon. Gentleman acknowledged the catalogue of concerns in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth).

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the press is accurate to describe the current position as a fiasco? It is not acceptable for him to say that the BOA was repeatedly writing to his officials, who were repeatedly passing on those concerns. We are left with the impression of his Department as a rudderless ship with nobody at the helm. Is it not inevitable that the buck must stop with him? When he was told by his officials that the BOA was raising concerns, month after month, he should have taken some action.

The previous Minister for Sport, who is very concerned about football and is the Government's representative in the 2006 bid, surprisingly is not in the Chamber this afternoon. He should have insisted on going to the meetings and checking that athletics was being incorporated in the designs. Why did he not do so? Would it not be better for the Secretary of State to apologise for the huge delay and the huge waste? He and the new Minister for Sport—who, to her credit, has at least taken the issue seriously since she was appointed—should play a far more active role in future.

Mr. Smith: I am afraid that I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's characterisation. However, I recognise all too well the lack of any constructive approach in his comments. The first concrete detailed analysis from an independent source that has been available to enable us to take firm decisions is the Ellerbe Becket report, which we received on Monday of this week.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): In view of the Manchester Commonwealth games configuration of our major stadium—which, of course, is laid out for athletics—is it now too late to bid for the 2003 world athletics championships for Manchester? Is it too late, in the reordering of that bid, to give it to Manchester city and so stop our athletics track being taken out? It would provide a solution for the games.

Whereas very few world cup games would be held at Wembley—they are held throughout the whole of England—the world athletics championships are committed only to Wembley. However, there is no space for a proper warm-up track. In Atlanta, that track was three miles from the main ground—people warmed up, warmed down and got cold on a bus, which then got lost going to the ground. There is not the infrastructure at Wembley to support the world athletics championships, so surely it is timely to look at this matter again

Mr. Smith: Through Sport England, we are putting £90 million into the construction of the new stadium for the Commonwealth games at Manchester, which will be an excellent stadium for those games. It is up to UK Athletics to decide whether it wishes to bid to host the world athletics championships, and where. Its favoured proposition, in everything that it has revealed to us, is that London is the city with the best chance of getting agreement from the International Amateur Athletic Federation. However, that decision is up to that organisation.

My hon. Friend is right about the warm-up track. In order to have either an Olympic stadium or a stadium capable of hosting the world athletics championships, there must be a warm-up track—if possible, immediately adjacent to the stadium or not far from it—of exactly the same size as the main track. That is possible at Wembley, although it would require the acquisition of land which is not in Wembley National Stadium Ltd.'s ownership. However, that is possible to achieve, given the right circumstances.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): What does the Secretary of State think will be achieved by 15 December—which, if I heard him correctly, is the date on which he wants a report back from the further inquiries? What does he expect to happen between now and then—just two weeks time? Is not the reality of what he has told the House today, both in his statement and in the answers that he has given, that he has conceded that the Wembley stadium proposal will not work as both a football stadium and an athletics track?

In that case, the sooner a decision is made, the better, because clearly part of the reason for the huge £475 million cost of developing Wembley—which, from what the right hon. Gentleman has said, will be just a football and rugby stadium—is the attempt to incorporate an athletics track. How much time is there left to Wembley and those trying to redevelop it to decide to have only a football and rugby stadium at a lower cost, while not affecting the world cup 2006 bid?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman says that the sooner a decision is made, the better. I entirely agree. That is why I have given a strict time scale of 15 days for Wembley National Stadium Ltd., in particular, to come back with any answers it might have to the concerns raised in the Ellerbe Becket report. It may be that it has a magic solution in its back pocket that answers Ellerbe Becket's criticisms—but as I said in my statement, I doubt it. If it

does—and it must be given that opportunity, as that is only fair and proper—we may be back on track for Wembley to do both. If not, at that point we need to make a firm decision on whether Wembley goes ahead just for football and rugby and we look for somewhere else for athletics.

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): I very much welcome the fact that we are coming to the point of decision. I believe firmly that Wembley is the right place for football. I do not share others' qualms about investing £120 million of lottery money in sport at Wembley—we have just invested £250 million in the Royal Opera house. I do not object to that, either, but sport is entitled to its share of the lottery provision.

As someone who has had the privilege of playing at Wembley, I know that the conditions there for players, spectators and visitors are appalling. The sooner we get it upgraded, the sooner we will rightly win the bid for 2006.

Mr. Smith: The one thing on which I would disagree is that although the total global cost of the Royal Opera house is £240 million, the investment from the lottery is about £80 million. However, my hon. Friend's point about the importance of upgrading the existing facilities at Wembley and ensuring that we have a truly world-class modern stadium is extremely important.

BILLS PRESENTED

Child Support, Pensions and Social Security

Mr. Secretary Darling, supported by Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Straw, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Mr. Secretary Reid, Mr. Secretary Murphy, Mr. Secretary Mandelson, Mr. Jeff Rooker, Mr. Hugh Bayley, Angela Eagle and Jane Kennedy, presented a Bill to amend the law relating to child support; to amend the law relating to occupational and personal pensions and war pensions; to amend the law relating to social security benefits and social security administration; to amend the law relating to national insurance contributions; to amend Part III of the Family Law Reform Act 1969 and Part III of the Family Law Act 1986; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 9].

Transport

Mr. Secretary Prescott, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Straw, Mr. Secretary Byers, Mr. Secretary Reid, Mr. Secretary Murphy, Mr. Keith Hill and Mr. Chris Mullin, presented a Bill to make provision about transport: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 8].

European Union

[Relevant documents: Minutes of Evidence taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee on 30th November 1999 (HC 68-i); First Report from the Environmental Audit Committee, on EU Policy and the Environment: an Agenda for the Helsinki Summit (HC 44); and the White Paper (Cm. 4531), Developments in the European Union, January–June 1999.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

4.6 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): This debate gives the House its customary opportunity to discuss the issues before the forthcoming European Council in Helsinki. This is the second European summit under the Finnish presidency. The successful first summit at Tampere stepped up co-operation between member states on access to justice and the fight against crime. Britain left Tampere having secured all our major objectives.

We secured agreement to give British citizens easier access to courts on the continent. The measures that we set in hand at Tampere will be of practical benefit to the millions of British citizens who travel to the continent and the tens of thousands of British business men who do business there.

We agreed on joint action to reduce the flow of illegal immigration and bogus asylum seekers, including programmes to reduce the pressures for migration in the countries of origin, and we secured agreement to proposals by Britain for enhanced co-operation in the fight against organised crime and the prevention of juvenile crime.

In short, the first Finnish summit took some sensible measures that will provide practical solutions to real problems in the lives of our citizens. At Helsinki, we will also consider issues of immediate relevance to European citizens. For example, we will start the preparatory work for the special summit next spring on economic reform, in which Britain is making a leading contribution by arguing for a more open, flexible European economy, better able to compete in the globalised economy.

We expect Helsinki to update the employment guidelines and to adopt a paper on the information society in Europe, both of which measures serve Britain's priority in developing a skilled, flexible labour force and a knowledge-driven industry.

Helsinki will also consider a presidency report on some long-standing negotiations on tax. Britain has chaired the working group on a code of conduct on harmful taxation and we broadly welcome its proposals, which will enable British industry to compete without being disadvantaged by unfair tax breaks to its competitors.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr. Cook: I will happily give way, but if the hon. Gentleman had waited for the next paragraph, he would have got his answer.

Mr. Leigh: Is it the Foreign Secretary's personal opinion that the euro needs a withholding tax to prosper?

Mr. Cook: No. Britain famously has differences with our partners over the draft directive on the taxation of savings. The directive was conceived long before the euro came into being.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): In that case, would the Foreign Secretary veto the introduction of such a tax?

Mr. Cook: I am happy to assure the House that we have no intention of agreeing to a tax on savings that does not protect the eurobond market in London. We believe that it is in the interests not only of Britain but of Europe that the market remains in a European location. It is not only Britain but our partners and other financial markets throughout Europe that would lose if the eurobond market in the City of London became uncompetitive around the globe. Therefore, we will resist taxation of the international bond market to protect not just our interests but those of Europe.

We have put forward proposals to meet the objectives of the directive without applying a tax to the bond market. We believe that there are reasonable and sensible ways of meeting both the German concern over the evasion of tax on savings and the British concern to protect the City of London as an international market. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will continue to maintain that position at a special meeting of ECOFIN that will be held in the margins of the Helsinki summit.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): On the subject of the code of conduct committee, does it not worry the Government that the report of the Primarolo group for the meeting on Wednesday will not be made public, although copies can be obtained if one telephones Brussels? Why do the Government say that the United Kingdom has undertaken to make the code of conduct principles apply in places such as the Channel Islands when, under the protocol, tax measures cannot be made to apply in the Channel Islands by the British Government? Do the Government believe that they have the power to implement those proposals or not?

Mr. Cook: We are clear with the European Union about the limits of our constitutional responsibilities and, therefore, any commitment that we give with regard to the Crown dependencies or the overseas territories, for which I am personally responsible, is clearly limited by our constitutional capacity to oversee the relevant areas of competence. I stress to the House that the code of conduct is a British initiative, and, indeed, as the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) admits, the committee has a British chair. Together with British business, we are keen to ensure the acceptance of the principle that there should not be unfair competition in the form of special tax breaks for our competitors. It is in the interests of British industry that we see that through to success.

I turn now to the main items on the agenda of the summit for leaders. Britain goes to Helsinki with three strategic objectives for the discussions—first, to obtain agreement to the next major wave of enlargement; secondly, to obtain terms for the next intergovernmental conference which will keep it focused on enlargement and enable it to be completed in a reasonable time frame; and thirdly, to obtain a commitment to a stronger security system in Europe and a more effective capacity for Europe to handle crisis management.

Let me take enlargement first. There are already six countries in negotiations for accession to the European Union. That is a major undertaking, but progress has been good. By the end of the Finnish presidency, we will have opened negotiations on two thirds of the chapters of community law. In about half of those chapters, negotiations are now completed. Those negotiations have been co-operative, not confrontational. Both sides to the negotiations have a common interest in securing the success of enlargement.

At Helsinki, Britain will argue that we should now expand negotiations to include the remaining six countries in the accession process.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I offer my compliments to my right hon. Friend on his work in ensuring that the enlargement programme proceeds as smoothly as possible. However, is it not the case that the Commission's target date of 2002 is now, to put it bluntly, unrealistic until certain institutions of the European Union have been reformed?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is right to point out that we have to reform the institutions of the European Union to prepare it for enlargement. I shall deal with that point more fully when I reach the subject of the intergovernmental conference. I disagree that 2002 is an unrealistic objective. It is possible for us to complete the intergovernmental conference in the next year, but only if we keep its terms tightly focused on the issues necessary for enlargement. In the meantime, we are keen to get agreement that the other six countries should start negotiation.

Latvia and Lithuania have made good progress, and Slovakia would have been included in the first wave had its previous Government observed the standards of democracy and pluralism achieved by its current Government. Malta is well placed to join negotiations following the election of a Government committed to reviving that country's application.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister visited both Bulgaria and Romania during the Kosovo conflict and gave them our pledge that at Helsinki we would support the opening of negotiations for their countries. We do not underestimate the work that both countries have to do before they are ready for membership, but both Governments are realistic and recognise that the steps that they must take to prepare their countries for the EU are the same as those that they need to take to improve their citizens' prosperity and quality of life.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): If Bulgaria and Romania are to improve the life of their citizens, has not something to be done about unblocking the Danube? There was a debate in Westminster Hall this morning about the whole Balkan problem, but is not unblocking the Danube of great importance for those two countries?

Mr. Cook: I agree absolutely, and the only country blocking the unblocking of the Danube is Serbia.

We continue to make proposals that would allow the unblocking of the Danube to take place. We are willing to help and to provide the technical and financial help to remove the objects that block the river. The only obstacle to that at the moment is Serbia. However, both Bulgaria and Romania loyally supported the NATO and EU position throughout the Kosovo conflict. We owe it to them to open negotiations for membership at Helsinki.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I take the point that my right hon. Friend makes about the support that Bulgaria and Romania provided during the war. However, is he aware that, at a recent meeting of the North Atlantic Assembly in Amsterdam, a Member of the Romanian Parliament said, in a very regretful tone of voice, that 2,500 jobs had been lost in his constituency because the Danube was blocked? Given that NATO bombed those bridges, is there no way that assistance can be provided towards rebuilding them?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Both Romania and Bulgaria face real financial and economic costs as a result of the support that they gave us throughout the Kosovo conflict. Those costs arise because traffic is disrupted and because both countries have barges stranded on the wrong side of the bridges in Serbia. Those two countries have made real sacrifices to support the objectives that we pursued in Kosovo.

I can assure the House that we are ready to assist in unblocking the Danube. We want the river to be restored as a free international waterway. We are not prepared to help President Milosevic to claim credit that he does not deserve for the reconstruction of his country.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Ah.

Mr. Cook: I am slightly surprised that the hon. Gentleman should be surprised at that. If the Opposition want to give credit to President Milosevic, it would be helpful if they would come out into the open and say so.

Mr. Wells: My amazement at what the Foreign Secretary said stemmed from the fact that it seems that the condition for unblocking the Danube—of which I am very much in favour—is that Milosevic should be removed from power.

Mr. Cook: No.

Mr. Wells: That is what I was seeking assurance about.

Mr. Cook: The only person putting a condition on unblocking the Danube is President Milosevic, who is saying that he will not permit it unless we rebuild all the bridges. The Government cannot accept that bargain. I should be very surprised if any Opposition Member recommended that we accept it.

Britain will also be working at Helsinki for a declaration that recognises the status of Turkey as a candidate for EU membership. Negotiations on membership with Turkey will not be possible until it has made progress towards meeting the Copenhagen criteria on human rights. We welcome the improvements in human rights that are being made by the new Government, such as the removal of military judges from the security court, the amnesty for journalists convicted under the media laws, and the proposed removal of immunity for police and prison officers against prosecution.

Much more needs to be done, but we should recognise that the political forces in Turkey working for greater freedom and stronger human rights are also the political forces that look to Europe for their inspiration, and to which Europe should be holding out encouragement.

On Friday, talks begin at the United Nations to resolve the long-standing division of Cyprus. Progress in those talks will help create a climate in which it would be easier to gain support for the recognition of Turkey as a candidate country. Britain believes that Cyprus's accession to the European Union would be easier with a settlement that enabled it to join as a single, united island, but we do not believe that a solution to the division of the island should be a precondition for membership for the Republic of Cyprus. No third country has a veto on the accession of any candidate.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for sending a clear message to the Turkish Government that they cannot block Cyprus's membership by not making progress. Can he also make it clear to the Turkish Government that the treatment of the Kurdish population is important? Although some changes have taken place on language in recent years, Kurdish political activists are regularly imprisoned and Kurdish political parties, including those that do not espouse violence, are persecuted in Turkey.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support for the formulation that we have followed in relation to Cyprus. I know of his close interest in the matter. On the Kurdish population in Turkey, it is important for both sides in Europe and in Turkey to recognise that respect for minority rights is one of the fundamental principles enshrined in the Copenhagen criteria. We have made good progress on that with several countries already in the accession process and we would expect the same standards to be met by Turkey before negotiations could be started.

The House should beware of regarding enlargement as a one-off process that will suddenly happen on accession day. Much is already happening for the better in central and eastern Europe. Across the region, the rights of ethnic minorities are improving because of the Copenhagen criteria. In country after country, painful decisions on economic reform and trade liberalisation are being taken under the stimulus of access to the single market. The Governments of three separate countries have taken steps to close nuclear power plants because of EU requirements on the safety of the environment.

Each of those candidate countries is making heroic efforts to get ready for membership. We would not be playing fair by them if we did not show the same commitment to getting the EU ready for enlargement. That is why our second objective for Helsinki is to secure a commitment to an intergovernmental conference that prepares the way for enlargement and is kept sufficiently focused to be completed in time for enlargement.

There are three changes to institutions of the European Union that are made more pressing by enlargement. The one in which Britain has the clearest self-interest is the reweighting of votes within the Council. It is a principle

[Mr. Cook]

of the European Union that the weighting of votes diminishes the difference in size between the member states. Thus Belgium gets five votes, while Britain gets 10, although it is six times bigger than Belgium.

As each successive wave of enlargement brings in more small countries, the disadvantage to the larger countries becomes worse. Britain, France and Germany contain between them a clear majority of the population of the European Union, but they have barely a third of the votes in the Council of Ministers. That disadvantage will get even more marked after enlargement. Unless changes are made, Britain, France and Germany together will not only be a minority but will not even be a blocking minority under qualified majority voting. That is why any further enlargement needs to be accompanied by a reweighting of votes in the Council that more fairly reflects the difference in population between member states.

Of course, we must also get the balance right between procedures that give weight to larger populations while recognising that Europe is a union of equal member states. That is why Britain recognises the importance that each member state, however small, attaches to retaining a seat on the European Commission. There is a practical limit to how big the Commission can become and still remain efficient. That is why all the larger member states are willing to concede their right to a second seat on the Commission. That would enable the probable first wave of enlargement to take place with little increase in the size of the Commission. It is a fair package deal between the large and small nations. The large states would get a fairer share of the votes in the Council and the small states would retain their right to a seat on the Commission. I stress that it is a package. Britain will not concede its second seat on the Commission if there is no agreement to increase Britain's voting strength in the Council.

A fairer weighting of votes in the Council is also relevant to the third issue before the IGC—whether there should be an increase in qualified majority voting. The Government believe that some key matters of national interest are always best resolved by unanimity. That includes issues such as border controls, defence, taxation, social security, own resources and treaty amendments. Neither we, nor many of our partners, intend to accept qualified majority voting in these areas.

For much of the rest of decision making within the European Union, QMV is already the rule. Some four fifths of decision making within the Council of Ministers is based on QMV. As a result, there is limited scope for expansion, but outside the key matters of national interest we are willing to consider the introduction of QMV on a case-by-case basis.

Sometimes Opposition Members appear to be afraid of majority voting because they assume that Britain will always be in the minority. That may well have been their experience in government, but it has not been ours. Our experience has been that if we argue a good case with good will and good presentation, we can mobilise a majority vote. Last year, votes took place in the Council of Ministers on 213 occasions. Britain was overruled only twice, whereas by contrast Germany was overruled 18 times, the Netherlands 15 times and Italy 13 times. Those who insist on the national veto should recognise that the balance of advantage in bringing back unanimity in those votes would have been heavily in favour of Germany and the others, not in favour of the arguments that Britain put forward for its national interest.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): The Foreign Secretary has just disclosed quite a lot of information about voting in the Council of Ministers, which I understand was previously kept confidential. Is he prepared henceforth to provide all information on voting in the Council of Ministers to the House of Commons Library so that we can have some genuine democratic scrutiny of what is going on?

Mr. Cook: I do not imagine that the hon. Gentleman was complaining that I was releasing new information. I hoped that it might inform the House and remove some of the prejudices of his honourable colleagues. It has long been Britain's position—in fairness, under both Labour and Conservative Governments—that there should be more transparency in the Council of Ministers. I personally would have no objection to revealing the votes, but it would be wrong for us to do so unilaterally without the agreement of our partners. We shall continue to argue that case. In the meantime, I hope that the information that I have provided will help to dispel some of the prejudices against qualified majority voting among Opposition Members.

There may even be some cases that are resolved by unanimity at present in which majority voting might be in Britain's interests. Transport is an example in which QMV would help the UK to advance a more liberalising agenda. Similarly, reform of the European Court of Justice would be made easier if its rules of procedure could be agreed by QMV, not unanimity. If we want to make sure that the rules of the single market are policed vigorously and effectively then we need a European Court of Justice that does not take years to reach a verdict.

However, I can assure the House and especially the Opposition that, whatever may be agreed on QMV this time around, it will be as nothing compared with the positive deluge of majority voting that occurred while the Conservatives were in power. They agreed to majority voting on 42 new articles, and they were right to do so. If they had not done so, we would never have been able to forge the single market because we would never have been able to overrule those who wanted to put obstacles in its path.

I congratulate Opposition Members on having been the architects of the biggest expansion of QMV in the history of the European Union. I would congratulate them even more if, given that record, they were now to give up the pretence of being the champions of the veto. It is a fair offer—I hope that they will accept it.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will the right hon. Gentleman concede that there is a vast difference between QMV on trade matters compared to, for example, European government matters? Will he assure the House that we will retain the veto for those matters on which other member states want an extension to QMV—defence and foreign policy, for example?

Mr. Cook: I began this section of my speech by saying that we would retain unanimity on defence. There is already a provision—

Mr. Cash: What about foreign policy?

Mr. Cook: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would allow me to answer his question. There is already a provision in

the foreign policy section for majority voting where there is implementation of an agreed strategy; unanimity is required for that. We see no case for making a change and do not intend to support one. *[Interruption.]* I am being perfectly frank in my response to the hon. Gentleman's question. However, he seems to care neither to defend the record of the previous Conservative Government in expanding majority voting, nor to accept that the Conservatives cannot now pretend to be champions of the veto.

Our agenda for the IGC is to keep it focused on enlargement. Some other minor items might be included in the agenda, but the Government's view is that any such additions should not be so extensive as to defeat the central objective of preparing the EU for enlargement, and of doing so as quickly as possible.

The Opposition's view, as stated to their conference, is that the IGC should be taken hostage. Last week, their Foreign Affairs spokesman, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), accused me of getting their policy wrong. I am anxious to get it right, because it is so wrong-headed that it does not need to be misrepresented in order to be discredited. I have therefore checked what the Leader of the Opposition said to the Conservative conference. He said:

"The new EU Treaty must contain a flexibility clause or else I tell you there will be no new Treaty".

Those words at least have the merit of being clear, if not blunt. They are capable of only one construction, which is, I suspect, shared by the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East: unless the rest of Europe agrees to the Conservative vision of a pick-and-mix Europe, there will be no new treaty from the IGC.

The institutional protocol to the Amsterdam treaty is equally blunt. I remember it well because I drafted it at 4 o'clock in the morning in order to end the impasse in negotiations. It provides that, before the date of entry into force of the first enlargement, there shall be reform of the seats on the Commission and the weighting of votes in the Council. The political reality is that if there is no new treaty, there will be no enlargement.

Enlargement is in Britain's own interest. It makes no economic sense for us to oppose the increase of the single market that will come from enlargement.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Surely enlargement is not in our interest alone. However, will my right hon. Friend assess the damage to our interest resulting from our unpopularity with the candidate countries—indeed, from their hostility—if we were to block their aspirations towards the new Europe?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend puts his finger on the second big problem in the Conservative strategy. Someday, those dozen countries will be full members of the European Union. It is in Britain's interests that they should remember us as an ally and as an advocate of their membership. The Conservative strategy would leave the next generation of new members resenting Britain as a country that tried to block the treaty that paved their way to membership. When the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon speaks, he must defend that policy or, better still, tell the House he is going to drop it.

Agreement to the next round of enlargement and to the launch of the new treaty are Britain's two strategic objectives for Helsinki. However, there is a third: to take forward the work on the European security initiative. This is a British initiative. It was initially proposed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the Pörtschach European summit and was endorsed at the subsequent UK-French summit at St. Malo. Over the year since then, we have built up strong support for it among all member states, culminating last month in the first ever joint meeting of the Foreign and Defence Ministers of the European Union. This is not a case of Europe imposing a burden on Britain; it is an example of Britain shaping the agenda of Europe.

Britain took that initiative because it is right. Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo have all shown that crisis management requires a joined-up approach that brings together the economic, financial and humanitarian assets of the European Union and the military assets of the European countries in NATO; but if we are to achieve that, we must address three priorities, and we shall address all of them at Helsinki.

First, the European Union must develop a more coherent and more urgent capacity for crisis management. I shall not readily forget the crisis of the first tidal wave of refugees to reach Macedonia, when Europe's response was handicapped because it was Easter weekend. That is why we now propose a standing political and security committee of senior officials, which will provide a permanent mechanism for implementing the common foreign and security policy and responding swiftly to emerging crisis.

Secondly, we need better transmission between the European Union, which is where we agree our common foreign policy, and NATO, which is the organisation to which we commit our military assets. That is why we are proposing a military committee, which would enable the European Union, in a crisis, to draw on expert and realistic advice on the feasible military options. It would be Britain's intention, and that of many of our partners, to double-hat our military representative to NATO as a member of that committee.

Thirdly, all the improvements in decision making will make no difference in practice if we do not have the capability to carry them out. Britain has already, through the strategic defence review, reshaped our military forces to enhance their capability for rapid, flexible deployment in a crisis; but Kosovo did expose for Europe as a whole a real problem in projecting effective military assets from immobile standing armies. That is why we are advocating that the European nations, co-operating together, should set themselves the target of being able to deploy, within 60 days, a corps level of military force and to sustain it in the field for at least a year.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Has it occurred to the Foreign Secretary that, with five member states of the European Union being neutrals, with some of them not being members of NATO, and with the United States of America of course not being a member of the European Union, there are many complications in what he proposes, and that the solution that he is talking about will create additional problems instead of resolving the problems that he instanced initially?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for pointing out that this is a complex matter. We have had extensive discussions with the five members of the

[Mr. Cook]

European Union that are not members of NATO. Today I met the Foreign Minister of Sweden, who confirmed that she had no concerns about the way in which we have reshaped our proposals for Helsinki. We expect support from Finland, which will hold the presidency in Helsinki. We have also had extensive discussions with those members of NATO that are not members of the European Union.

This process is not suddenly being proposed; it has been continuing for a year, and now has unanimous support in the European Union and unanimous support in NATO. I doubt that any rational Member of the House could genuinely object to a prudent investment in stronger security for Europe. The Government's initiative has the full support of the Liberal Democrats. *[Interruption.]* Those wonderful, rational Members. A joint paper arguing the case for it is one of the products of our joint consultative committee.

Even the Conservative party has not dared criticise the initiative for what it is. The criticisms that there have been are criticisms of a grotesque caricature of it—a fantasy that exists only in the Conservatives' imagination. Let us therefore be clear in our minds about what is being proposed. This initiative is about crisis management, humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping—the missions that the Opposition themselves agreed to in office as the Petersberg tasks. It is not about collective territorial defence. That is and will remain a job only for NATO. Nor does it prevent NATO from carrying out those tasks of crisis management if it wishes to do so. Only last week, the Anglo-French summit adopted a joint text that explicitly states that Europe will act only where NATO as a whole is not engaged.

None of that has stopped Conservative Members roaming the globe claiming that we are plotting the end of NATO. Their defence spokesman, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), went to Washington and told members of Congress:

"European nations have embarked on a course which we consider will damage critically and even potentially destroy NATO".

Just to show that he was not prejudiced against the British Government alone, he also threw in some gratuitous insults against our German allies.

There used to be a convention that Opposition Members, while abroad, refrained from criticism of the Government. In this case, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green not only ignored the convention but deliberately went abroad to lobby against the British Government and their allies. If we had ever done that in opposition, Conservative Members would have loudly denounced us as disloyal, irresponsible and unpatriotic.

Mr. Cash *rose—*

Mr. Cook: I have already given way to hon. Gentleman once. Will he forgive if I do not give way to him again, because once was quite enough for me?

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Foreign Secretary's comments are a bit rich from someone who supported the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament during the cold war. On the more serious point, the right hon. Gentleman said that the process would produce a deployable corps of European forces for a year. I begin to doubt that it will. Does he appreciate how big a corps is? I wonder where those troops will come from. However, if such a corps is produced, the problem is that the United States will look constantly to Europeans to deploy that force. Its commitment to NATO and to the joint political and military commitment that has sustained the west and the transatlantic alliance will begin to disappear.

Mr. Cook: Before coming to the House, I read the telegrams that have come from Washington. The telegram about the discussions held with the State Department yesterday on the Anglo-French communiqué contains the report that the State Department had been over the document with a fine-toothed comb and could find nothing in it of concern to it.

The hon. Gentleman misses the point. Neither I nor any of my colleagues at any time when we were in opposition went before a Congressional Committee to argue against the stated foreign policy of Her Majesty's Government. I would have no problem if the defence spokesman for the Opposition came to the House to argue his case and to criticise the Government. However, we object to the fact—Conservative Members would have objected to this when they were in office—that such criticisms were made before a foreign power and before the Committee of a another Parliament.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr. Cook: No, I wish to continue my speech.

The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green was not only wrong in his conduct, but he was wrong in his facts. Far from weakening NATO, the improved military response that we demand will provide resources not just for the European Union but for NATO. The Government are firmly committed to NATO as the cornerstone of our defence. It is because of our commitment to NATO that we were able to play a key role in maintaining the cohesion and resolve of the alliance through the Kosovo conflict. It is because of that commitment to NATO that we were able to secure the appointment of one of our colleagues, Lord Robertson, as the head of NATO. What is damaging to the alliance is any attempt to play party politics in Washington and to sow unjustified doubt about Britain's commitment to NATO.

The agenda for the Helsinki summit throws into sharp relief the different European strategies of the Government and the Opposition. We go to Helsinki to make a success of the summit and to get agreement to a new treaty, progress on enlargement and stronger European security. If they had the chance, Conservative Members would go to the summit to veto the new treaty and thereby block enlargement and stop the European security initiative. They would do so not because of any calculation of Britain's national interests, but because of a prejudice against Europe.

This Government understand the enormous benefits that our membership of the European Union has brought Britain. We know that we shall best secure the future of Britain by making the most of that membership.

The free movement of goods has removed barriers to our exports. The free movement of capital has strengthened the City of London. Recognition of our

professional qualifications has helped 100,000 British citizens to take up work in the European Union. Our strength in the world is greater, not weaker, as a result of our membership of the European Union. In the current trade talks, Britain is able to promote British interests more effectively as part of a European bloc than we would ever be able to do on our own.

It is in Britain's interest that Europe should be a success. We shall therefore work to make a success of the Helsinki summit. Its agenda offers the prospect of a European Union that is wider, European institutions that are more effective and a European security that is stronger. We ask for the support of the House in working for those objectives that serve both the future of Europe and the interest of Britain.

4.45 pm

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): This is the first occasion on which we have had a debate on Europe with the new Minister responsible for Europe, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), in his place. We are delighted to welcome him to his new job. The average life expectancy of people in his office is falling; it is currently about 10 months. The previous occupant was in the post for a few weeks, although at least he got promoted.

The hon. Gentleman comes to the post at a vital time, with the intergovernmental conference, in which he will no doubt have to play a significant role, about to start. In that respect, I hope that he turns out to be a better negotiator than his boss, whose tenure in office has not been characterised by diplomatic finesse and subtlety. It has in fact been characterised, particularly in the European Union, by a succession of surrenders, rather than negotiation.

We signed the social chapter and got absolutely nothing in return. At Amsterdam—[HON. MEMBERS: "Last week's speech."] There is much more in it than there was last week. I just want to remind the Foreign Secretary of his shortcomings. At Amsterdam, he gave up our veto in 16 areas and got nothing in return. The European security and defence identity, about which I shall have more to say later, is a complete U-turn on what he was saying after the Amsterdam treaty. It is a bit much for him to accuse us of being wrong because we do not share his objectives when he himself did not share them until about a year ago. Apparently, all that was done to get good will, and all I can say is that it was a very high price to pay for good will that, so far, seems to have achieved nothing.

I do not know whether you remember, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but, in the 1980s, there was a Danish politician who suggested that the Danes should scrap their defence budget and buy a tape recorder with a tape that said endlessly, "We surrender", in Russian. That is a policy of which the Foreign Secretary would no doubt have approved in his CND days, and old habits obviously die hard. We should like to see him, from time to time, standing up for Britain's interests rather than simply surrendering to other people's interests.

What has the Foreign Secretary done over the past two and a half years to get the single market completed? What has he done to stop a raft of damaging, costly regulation under the social chapter? What has he done in the European Union to stop the scandal of the Gibraltar border, which is a clear breach of the treaties? He first mishandled that matter at Amsterdam, and subsequently on Spain's entry to NATO's military command. Since then, there has been masterly inactivity while the border remains blocked. Why does he not get the Commission to take Spain to the European Court over that matter?

I sometimes wonder why the Government bother to go to summits at all, since, when they get there, they just go along with what others propose. They could save themselves a lot of money and trouble by just sending a power of attorney. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said:

"Britain's seat is never so empty as when the Prime Minister is sitting in it."

The Foreign Secretary's incompetence has been added to by farce. We now have a bus called EUnice going around the country. *[Interruption.]* If hon. Members want to intervene, I will be happy to take interventions, but there should be no barracking.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): Where is the lorry that we were promised?

Mr. Maples: That will be a much more sophisticated operation than EUnice, which is a pretty corny name even for a bus. It must have been Alastair Campbell's day off when they dreamed that one up. I thought that a classicist in the Foreign Office might have come up with Eurydice, but perhaps that is a little too complex for Foreign Office Ministers. The Minister with responsibility for Europe will have to put himself through the awful business of making a terrible fool of himself touring the country with Eddie Izzard. That shows what the Prime Minister thinks of the Foreign Office: he allows his tennis partner, Lord Levy of blind trust, to do the middle east and Eddie Izzard and EUnice to do Europe.

The name EUnice is perhaps more appropriate than the Government think, for the characteristics attributed to one who bears the name are a "tendency to make promises" that she cannot keep and

"to be lavish . . . and spend money freely".

Nothing could more accurately reflect the Government's attitude to Europe, or Europe's freedom with its own budget. There is a surprisingly large choice of words beginning with "EU", the two most appropriate to the Government being euphemism and eunuch—hype coupled with impotence—as they have so often characterised their diplomacy. All that would be a farce, were it not costing £60,000 of taxpayers' money, with what the parliamentary answer calls "travel and accommodation" on top—since the bus has recently been in Paris, I imagine that that did not come cheap.

All that is being done to

"set out the benefits of Britain's membership of the EU".

I wholly support that objective, and concur with many of the Foreign Secretary's assessments of those benefits—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] My saying that is nothing new. However, if that is the right hon. Gentleman's objective, he has been extraordinarily unsuccessful. The British social attitudes survey published in yesterday's *Financial Times* reveals that opposition to EU membership is now at an all-time high, with more than 50 per cent. of the British population wanting either to leave the EU, or to reduce its powers. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman would do better to stay at home.

[Mr. Maples]

The truth is that EUnice, like the national changeover plan, is part of the Government's plan to take us into the single currency by stealth. The Government dare not come out and say so, but that is their purpose.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Will the hon. Gentleman say whether he wants to keep Britain permanently out of the single currency?

Mr. Maples: Never is an extremely long time in politics. My view of the single currency is that of my party: that we should stay out of it until it has passed through at least one economic cycle, including a recession. In addition, there are significant economic and constitutional obstacles to joining. The hon. Gentleman knows that our policy for the next general election is to campaign on not joining the single currency for the duration of the next Parliament. That contrasts with the Government, who are trying to take us in by stealth.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): I thank the hon. Gentleman for the wide publicity he has given to the Government's Euro-roadshow. In the six cities that I have visited over the past two days, the bus has been warmly welcomed, and those who have welcomed the Government's action include several Conservative councillors in Newcastle.

Mr. Maples: I am delighted to hear that the pantomime is a success.

One of the serious issues facing the European Union, which is not on the agenda for Helsinki although I am sure that it will be discussed, is the millennium round of trade negotiations in Seattle. The Conservatives are committed to trying to achieve global free trade within the next 20 years, and transatlantic free trade far sooner than that. The EU will have a vital role to play in Seattle and in the meetings that follow. There have been some encouraging noises, but we must bear in mind how Leon Brittan's initiative to create a North Atlantic marketplace was effectively vetoed by France. I hope that that does not happen again. Almost all members of the EU share the view, held by the Foreign Secretary and me, that free trade is a good thing.

Tariffs are a tax on consumers. Why should EU consumers pay 9 per cent. on imported chocolate, 10 per cent. on imported biscuits and 13 per cent. on imported clothes? Why are there apparently special taxes on parking meters and life jackets? The EU has 15,600 separate import duties and 10 per cent. of the revenue gained from them is spent on collection. A recent study by a French economist estimates that the cost to the EU of that protectionism is between 6 and 7 per cent. of its gross domestic product: that is £300 billion a year, or the equivalent of nearly £1,000 per consumer and about £150,000 per job saved as a result of that protectionism. That is a bad deal for European consumers and businesses. The EU should now show that it is serious about free trade by stating its willingness during the millennium round to make a bonfire of most of its tariffs.

I know that the common agricultural policy will be a difficult hurdle. Commissioner Lamy was saying as much yesterday and today. However, reform of the CAP must come about if we are to succeed in this trade round, and I hope that we are all committed to that. Tariffs and quotas are the discredited apparatus of mercantilism and they have no place in the 21st century. We would like to see the EU take a lead in the global drive towards free trade.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Eighteen years.

Mr. Maples: A huge amount has been achieved in the past 18 years. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman noticed the Uruguay round. He probably did not. He was probably too busy interjecting in other people's speeches from where he sits. The Uruguay round gave a huge boost to world gross domestic product.

Last week, I spent a long time on the subject of the European security and defence identity and, today, the Foreign Secretary spent a long time on it. It is scheduled for discussion in Helsinki. We should not forget that, a year ago, the Government thought that the EU had no role in this area. After the Amsterdam negotiations, the Prime Minister prided himself on how he had succeeded in vetoing the French-German initiative to give the EU capability or some role in military matters. The Foreign Secretary said the same thing after Amsterdam. However, the Government have done a 180 deg U-turn.

It is no good, as they did last week, the Foreign and Defence Secretaries pretending that there is no United States concern about the matter. The US is wholly behind the idea, as are we, of Europe beefing up its defence capabilities within NATO, but neither the US nor we like the idea of this development moving outside NATO, as it appears to be doing. We believe that this will end up as a threat to NATO, and I shall explain why.

After last week's debate, we had the Anglo-French summit, when these matters were considered more closely. As the communiqué states, military co-operation was approved in developing

"rapid capability goals in the fields of command and control, intelligence and strategic lift".

Those things are currently supplied by the United States. The communiqué said that that would involve costly duplication of intelligence and command-and-control mechanisms. It added that there should be a military committee and military structures set up with a military staff under the EU, and that is outside NATO.

As recently as June, the Foreign Secretary was saying that there was no question of a European army. However, two or three weeks ago, we were talking about a Euro Corps of 40,000 people. At the summit with the French, we were talking about 50,000 to 60,000 people. The Italian Defence Minister is now quoted in *L'Unità* as calling for a European army of 120,000 people. It is no good the Foreign Secretary pretending that there is no such agenda. He is playing with fire. He is playing along with an agenda that he does not control and that I believe that he does not understand. It is dangerous, and it will undermine NATO.

Anglo-French military co-operation is not new and the Government did not invent it. However, it is a very good thing and we wholly approve of it. We are the two most serious military powers in Europe with the ability to project force. We have had a combined air group for a long time. There have been many combined naval exercises and our armies often find themselves doing things together.

Any additional momentum that can be given to interoperability—for example, the ability to land on each other's carriers or use each other's heavy lift capabilities—is to be welcomed. However, I believe that command and control of any European operation must be within NATO. That is now in danger of developing outside NATO and, if that move takes place, it is bound to become a competitor to NATO. The EU nations will meet first to discuss their views and then they will go to NATO. That is what frightens the United States.

The United States made its views clear at the Washington summit. It set out three tests. First, it said that there should be no duplication, but setting up new command-and-control systems, military committees and intelligence-gathering apparatus involves expensive duplication at a time when the American Secretary of Defence is criticising the Germans for how little they spend on defence. However, they want to involve themselves in expensive duplication.

Countries outside the EU but within NATO, such as Turkey, Norway, Poland and Hungary, are discriminated against. Turkey and Norway have been valuable NATO allies for a long time. For the reasons that I have set out, the present moves will lead to the decoupling of the United States. All this might be worth while if we were prepared to spend the money to build a real European capability and then say, "We want to control this without the United States." However, that is a fantasy. Governments are cutting their defence budgets. This Government have cut the defence budget by £1.2 billion a year over the course of this Parliament. The defence budget in Germany is being cut by 10 per cent. We are in danger of getting the worst of both worlds: a weak European Union and a weakened NATO.

It is no good pretending that the United States is not worried about this; it is. United States Secretary of Defence Cohen is paying a surprise visit to Europe this week, I suspect as a result of what has gone on in the various Franco-Italian, Franco-German and Franco-British summits that have taken matters forward. He wants to make sure that the US view is known before we all go to Helsinki.

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Although I disagree with much of what he says, I welcome the fact that the points are being made in the Chamber. Will the shadow Foreign Secretary give an assurance that he will not follow the example of the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), and cross the Atlantic to give evidence to a Congressional Committee that attacks the policies of this Government?

Mr. Maples: The committee was not attacking what the Foreign Secretary says the Government's policy is. He says that it is no threat to NATO. I will give no such undertaking. The matter is so serious and the Government are making such a serious mistake, with the fundamental security interests of the country at stake, that we are right to do everything that we can to stop them.

The Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary may be able to kid their Back Benchers, the public and us, but I hope that they are not kidding themselves. What they are doing is extremely serious. If I am right and the Foreign Secretary is wrong, the country will pay a high price for that mistake. If he studies what some of his European counterparts are saying, he will find that their view of where matters are going is different from his.

It was reported in *The New York Times* that, after the summit, the French Foreign Minister acknowledged that

> "France was out in front of some of its allies in arguing that a European reaction force should be able to operate with complete autonomy even if it was put together from units that formally belonged to the alliance."

That is new.

In the same article, the French Defence Minister is reported as speaking to his European colleagues in Brussels about the need for stronger European defences. The article continues:

> "Richard said not a word about the relationship that a European military staff would have to NATO."

As the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* pointed out, the real question is whether the European countries are ready to spend the billions of dollars that it would take for them to catch up with the United States. Clearly, they are not prepared to do so.

There has been no explanation from the Foreign Secretary or the Prime Minister why, a year ago, they did a 180 deg flip-flop on the subject. If they had gone into the election setting out their present view of the role of the European Union, that would have made sense, but they have done a 180 deg U-turn, with no explanation at all.

Why did the position change so radically between Amsterdam and St. Malo? We have never had an explanation for that. We suspect that it is all because the Prime Minister was worried about Britain not being in the first round of the euro, and the kind of reception that he would get at the summit. Indeed, we know that that is the reason because, if there were a better reason, we would have heard about it from the Foreign Secretary today, or after the St. Malo summit. The hon. Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire) criticised my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) for giving evidence to Congress, but we find it appalling that the Government are prepared to sell out Britain's long-term security interests for a weekend's headlines—for a weekend's public relations. The country's interests ought to be more important than that. We shall fight the Government's policy all the way.

The Foreign Secretary was radically wrong in the cold war. He was a supporter of unilateral nuclear disarmament and he has been proved to be wrong. His judgment is no better now. He has allowed himself to be the tool of an anti-American lobby, to which many in France and many in his party have long belonged. If the policies that he is pursuing damage NATO and our security, this country, whose interests and security he seems so little to understand, will have paid an extremely high price.

Mr. Donald Anderson: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the riposte to the evidence of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) to the Congressional Committee was given by Elmer Brock, who was the leading member of the Christian Democrat Union in Germany—a party that one would assume to be related to the same political family as his own? Does not

[Mr. Donald Anderson]

the fact that that riposte was given by a Conservative from Germany reflect the almost total isolation of the hon. Gentleman's party in this field, as in all European fields?

Mr. Maples: I shall never feel isolated while the United States is on my side. My hon. Friends and I know Elmer Brock well; we share some of his views, but not the one that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

I want to consider other matters that will be raised in Helsinki, if only at the margins. It is time to kill off the withholding tax; the Government should have done that a long time ago. It would have done better for the City and our relations with European Union partners if the Government had said from the start that they would not tolerate the tax and that they would veto it. Instead, a great deal of damage has been done. The Treasury's paper on the withholding tax, which was published in September, states:

"The proposed directive is already having an impact on the market . . . Swiss bankers have been reporting unprecedented capital inflows since the Spring of last year."

The uncertainty is causing enormous damage. We handled the matter by saying that we would not tolerate it and that we would not even discuss it. However, the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary have given supporters of the tax a little hope and, consequently, a messy compromise will be proposed. *[Interruption.]* Why do the Government continue to negotiate about it? It has been said that we will have a withholding tax if the eurobond market can be accommodated. It should have been made clear that the European Union has no role in setting individual countries' tax policies and that we would use our veto. If there is an opportunity to kill off the withholding tax at Helsinki, we should take it because that would be better not only for the bond market but for our relations with our European partners.

It is ridiculous for the German Finance Minister to blame the weakness of the euro on the lack of a joint approach to the withholding tax. Its weakness is due to all sorts of other reasons, which may prove to be temporary. The euro may bounce back.

Mr. MacShane: Ah!

Mr. Maples: Currency values go up and down. It is not surprising that a new currency is initially weak.

The drive for harmonisation will not stop with the withholding tax. We will be told that our corporation tax rate is unfairly low, and we will be asked to increase that to meet standards in Europe. The Foreign Secretary shakes his head complacently. However, time and again, Conservative Members have witnessed initiatives, which began by being small and specific, becoming wider and general. For example, the social chapter began as a social charter—a series of aspirations that were not intended to have legislative effect—but where are we now? The working time directive costs £2 billion.

I want to consider droit de suite, which is the effective tax on art sales that the European Union wants to impose on everyone. It may succeed in doing that, because the proposal is subject to qualified majority voting. It is a classic example of a European Union directive that will simply increase business costs and drive business abroad. One or two countries have that ball and chain round their ankles, and they are trying to use the European Union to shackle everyone else.

To give it its due, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport has fought hard. Ministers have pointed out in parliamentary answers that £750 million of sales a year could be lost and that many jobs could be put at risk. No one gains from this beggar-my-neighbour policy. I hope that the Government's attempts to prevent its adoption are successful. However, if the new relationship with the European Union and the good will that has been bought at the heavy price of true British interests is not good enough to stop the directive, which uniquely damages Britain, or to allow the Foreign Secretary to tell our partners that it is important to stop it because many jobs in London are at stake and businesses will be driven to Zurich or New York, the relationship has not been worth it.

The single market will also be considered in Helsinki. An enormous amount of work remains to be done. The Commission's primary task for the next two or three years should be to concentrate on opening the markets in telecoms, utilities, airlines and financial services. There are too many blocks in the single market's way.

The Foreign Secretary said that the agenda for the intergovernmental conference was one of the most important items for discussion at Helsinki. I agree, and if the agenda is restricted to the items that the Foreign Secretary specified, we shall not have much trouble with it. The European Union has taken far too long to start serious negotiations about including the countries of eastern and central Europe. Their inclusion requires institutional, but only minimal, change—the unfinished business from Amsterdam needs to be dealt with.

There needs to be redistribution in respect of the number of Members of the European Parliament, and votes in the Council of Ministers need to be reweighted. I would like there to be a dual majority and a population threshold should be introduced as a second tier of qualified majority voting. I agree with the Foreign Secretary that the relative influence of the larger states should be increased, although the smaller states must have influence as well, and perhaps a two-tier voting system on qualified majority voting is the way to solve that problem. I agree that that needs to be achieved and should be happy for it to be done on those lines.

The Government appear to be ready to concede our second Commissioner. That would be a big sacrifice for us to make, but I agree with the Foreign Secretary that a Commission of 30 or 35 people is unthinkable. Such a concession would be acceptable only if there are significant changes in the balance of power in the Council of Ministers. We have to sort that problem out and must have that in the bag before we give up our second Commissioner.

I have the greatest fears about the extension of qualified majority voting. The Government have laid out a serious of categories in which they say that they will not give up our veto, and I hope that we can rely on that, but I have to say to the Foreign Secretary that Ministers from other Governments, and certainly the Commission, want to go a great deal further. The Government appear to be ready to concede in some areas, and I hope that they will stop at the two or three that he named but, if he has read Chancellor Schröder's speech to the Assemblée Nationale

yesterday, he will have seen that the German Chancellor, who wants much more qualified majority voting, does not share his view.

Mr. Leigh: We are constantly told that we need qualified majority voting to be extended if an enlarged EU of up to 25 nation states is to make any progress at all, but what great queue of directives that are in Britain's national interest will come about only because of such an extension? Will my hon. Friend confirm that our policy remains what it was at the European elections—no extension of qualified majority voting?

Mr. Maples: I agree with my hon. Friend; that remains our policy. I believe that the objectives of enlargement and institutional reform can be achieved without the extension of qualified majority voting.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Maples: May I make a little progress?

I am concerned about the call for new powers for the President in the nomination and selection of Commissioners. Mr. Prodi has made it clear that there is no doubt in his mind, or anybody else's, that he wants the Commission to be the Government of Europe and himself to be its President. I do not believe that we should cede those powers to the President of the Commission; they should remain with the Council of Ministers, which is properly and democratically accountable.

What really worries me about the IGC is that the agenda outlined by the Foreign Secretary is not the one that the President of the Commission has. When he was appointed President, he formed a committee—the so-called wise men's committee—of Simon, Dehaene and von Weizsäcker to look at degrees of institutional reform that would be necessary to make a much larger Community work. Its report is just what he wanted because it gives him the agenda that he wants, which is very dangerous and one that many others share.

The report calls for a massive extension of qualified majority voting to almost everything else: justice, home affairs, common foreign and security policy and some taxation issues. It calls for the EU to be given legal capacity—effectively, to be made a state—for the purposes of international negotiations and making treaties and for the division of treaties into two texts, one of which could be amended by qualified majority voting. We are now talking about surrendering the veto not only over tax, home affairs and justice, but over future treaty amendments. The Prodi agenda talks about integrating into treaties a charter of fundamental citizens rights, although the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leicester, East, has said that the provision is not intended to be enforceable. I hope that he is right, but his intention is not shared by Mr. Prodi and others—they want it to be enforceable.

As we have seen before, such things start small—as a good intention and good words—and I have referred to the example of the social charter. It was never intended to be a basis for legislation but, within five years, it had become the social chapter. Ministers should be careful because things that start as sentiments and expressions of good intention wind up in the law of the European Union. Mr. Prodi makes no bones about his agenda; that is what he wants and many other European politicians share that aim. However it is wrapped up, it is an agenda for a European super-state and the Commission would become the Government of Europe, which is totally unacceptable to us and, I believe, to most British people. That is the ultimate dividing line and, if the Government allow it to be crossed, we shall inevitably be on a one-way street to a single European state.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that, instead of simply saying that he intends to keep the veto in relation to defence, border controls and tax, it is time that the Foreign Secretary declared categorically that he will vote to stop in its tracks any treaty that removes or diminishes our national veto in any of those three areas?

Mr. Maples: My hon. Friend has made a good point. I raised that very question with the Foreign Secretary three and a half weeks ago, during Foreign Office questions. One of the reasons for my doubts about whether the Foreign Secretary really means what he says about going to the intergovernmental conference at Helsinki and maintaining our veto is the fact that, on that occasion, he refused to give the commitment that I sought—the commitment that my hon. Friend seeks now.

Mr. Robin Cook *rose—*

Mr. Maples: Before I give way to the Foreign Secretary, let me make clear what the question is. *[Interruption.]* It is not possible to answer a question without knowing what that question is.

If the treaty contains provisions that erode the veto in regard to any of the issues that we are discussing, will the Government refuse to sign it?

Mr. Cook: If the Government go to Helsinki, as we are committed to doing, and oppose qualified majority voting on those issues, there will be no treaty making such a proposal for us to sign. The hon. Gentleman seems not to understand what actually happens during negotiations of this kind. Let me explain our position, for the avoidance of doubt. Our position is that unanimity will remain on all those issues and, if we do not agree to what is proposed during the negotiations, there will be no such treaty.

I am delighted to discover that the hon. Gentleman apparently shares my view of what the agenda for the intergovernmental conference should be. Will he now explain what his leader meant when he said, "The next treaty will contain a flexibility clause, or there will be no treaty."? Does the exchange that took place at the Dispatch Box mean that the Conservatives have dropped their commitment to a flexibility clause, or have they recognised that they cannot in all conscience ask for enlargement in such circumstances?

Mr. Maples: I dealt with this matter at length in last week's foreign affairs debate. *[Interruption.]* I did. I spoke at length about what we wanted in terms of a flexibility clause, and our policy remains the same. If the treaty has been negotiated but not ratified at the time of the next general election and if we form the next Government, we shall negotiate the inclusion of a

[Mr. Maples]

flexibility clause along the lines that we have described, and we shall not accept a treaty that does not contain such a clause.

Mr. Cook *rose—*

Mr. Maples: I have already given way to the Foreign Secretary. *[Interruption.]* I have already given way to him.

What I said to the Foreign Secretary was exactly the same as his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). The Foreign Secretary said that he would not sign a treaty in those circumstances; indeed, he said that there would be no such treaty. Effectively, the right hon. Gentleman has said that there is no way that the British Government, represented by him, would put their name to such a treaty. We are saying exactly the same: that is what we would do if we could not get what we wanted.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman and I are not saying the same thing at all. I can stop any qualified majority voting on those issues, because unanimity would be required for a change to be made. The hon. Gentleman's problem is that inserting a flexibility clause would require unanimity, and no one else in Europe supports him. I repeat my question. Is the hon. Gentleman really saying that a Conservative Government would block the treaty, and block enlargement of the European Union?

Mr. Maples: I have made it clear that the answer to the question, "Would we refuse to sign the treaty in such circumstances?" is yes. Enlargement is proceeding separately—*[Interruption.]* It is. The enlargement negotiations are taking place with each—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I cannot allow hon. Members—or right hon. Members, for that matter—to shout at each other across the Floor.

Mr. Maples: The enlargement negotiations are proceeding separately, and the timetable relating to them will come into effect considerably later than the Helsinki treaty, or the Lisbon treaty, or whatever it will be called. I think that the earliest new accession will be in 2004. There is plenty of time in which to sort this out. I must say that I have rather more faith in my party's negotiating abilities in those circumstances than I have in the right hon. Gentleman's.

Flexibility is one of the issues on the Helsinki agenda, and it is one of the issues that a fair number of other people want to discuss. They want to talk about flexibility—about some countries proceeding with further integration at a faster rate than others. What we want is flexibility in both directions, as I explained in some detail last week. We must not just allow deeper integration on the part of some countries; we must allow others to integrate at a slower pace.

The final item on the agenda that I want to mention is the millennium declaration, which is supposed to be a statement of vision of the European Union into the next millennium. Given the Foreign Secretary's speech, there is not much chance that the Government will contribute much, as they have to wait to be told by others what their vision is. I suspect that they will just carry on as usual.

What really worries me is that the Prodi vision will be the vision that is outlined as the "aspiration" in that declaration: massive extension of qualified majority voting, more power for the Commission—in short, an integrated Europe. The vision is of a European super-state, in which business will become increasingly uncompetitive, in which calls for protectionism will be heard, in which NATO will be fatally undermined, and in which the voice of the nation state will inevitably be subsumed.

That is one vision of Europe. It is widely held. It is the vision that the Government dare not challenge, but we have a different vision. It is of an outward-looking, free market, free trade, competitive Europe, whose security is founded on the Atlantic alliance. Above all, it is of a Europe of independent nation states.

5.20 pm

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Members of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs are grateful that the business managers arranged the debate for the day after the Committee met the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. I hope that all who attended the meeting thought that it was highly productive. Consistent with our aim of providing a service to the House, we are pleased that the transcript of yesterday's proceedings is now available in the Vote Office.

I say in passing that I hope that all colleagues who serve either on Select Committees, or on outside bodies—whether the NATO parliamentary assembly, the Council of Europe or Western European Union—will be ready to feed their expertise into the House. Too often, there is a gulf between the expertise that is built up by colleagues in Select Committees, or outside and that in the Chamber, where the real debate should still take place.

The Helsinki summit, by all accounts, is capable of being one of the key summits in the history of the European Union. As always, there is some overlap from past summits and a looking forward to the future, but it is likely that key decisions will be made on enlargement, the intergovernmental conference and the European security and defence identity at the summit; at least, preparations will be made for key decisions in that area.

As the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) have said, there is a danger that the conflict with our partners on the withholding tax could seriously affect the spirit at the summit and, indeed, the time available. Ministers at ECOFIN—the Economic and Finance Council—are unlikely to reach an agreement. The battle lines have been drawn. If a compromise were easily available, it would have been found by now. If ECOFIN Ministers do not find that ready compromise, the matter will be referred to the Heads of Government.

We have made it clear that the eurobond market is a key interest. We shall not yield. I am delighted that the Government have shown that, where key UK interests are concerned, we shall stand firm, but we stand firm in the spirit of being partners. From my experience of dealing with European colleagues since the election, a sea change has come over the relationship with Europe. Until that time, there was clear isolation. Our friends in the United

States did not value our isolation from Europe under the Conservatives. That was made crystal clear, but now we are accepted as members of the club, fighting our interests on the withholding tax, but essentially seeking to find a way through in a European spirit. I congratulate the Secretary of State on the way in which he and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister have set that new tone in relations with our European partners, not European enemies.

That is why I find it so unfortunate and unhelpful when Conservative Members say that we are surrendering. Clearly, we have criticisms about the European Union and we are ready to make them, but, in the real world, there are a number of positive things that we value. We find that we can enhance our interests.

I see my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman). He will know, for example, that Scotch whisky manufacturers were unable to make any serious headway in Japan on their own through the UK Government. It was only when we were able to negotiate with Japan on an EU basis that we had sufficient clout to ensure that the British interest was protected. That is how partnership works. It enhances our reach and the projection of our interests overseas rather than hampering and confining them, as the Opposition would.

We have criticisms of the European Union, but it would be helpful if from time to time there was a scintilla of positive remarks about it from the Conservative Front Bench. I should be grateful if the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon would trawl through all the speeches made by the Leader of the Opposition since the election and try to find a single example of him saying anything positive about the European Union. The Leader of the Opposition is not living in the real world, but indulging in the worst sort of populism, pandering to the old ladies at Conservative party conferences and trying to treat us as though we were a conference. He is trying to put the frighteners on people.

Sir Teddy Taylor *rose—*

Mr. Anderson: I shall give way, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman could tell us whether anything positive has escaped from his lips on the European Union.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that every previous Prime Minister, including Conservatives, has started with a positive and co-operative approach to European policy? Does he remember our previous leader, who said that he wanted to be at the heart of Europe? Their minds are changed when they find that, sadly, the European Union is not in a position to solve problems and simply creates more nightmares for its people and those who suffer from its policies. If he doubts that, will he tell me the point of spending so much money on destroying a million tonnes of food every year?

Mr. Anderson: I find no evidence of any such change in my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. It is sad that the hon. Gentleman cannot find it in himself to say anything positive. Could we just have a little word about something that the European Union is doing right? Is it a totally bleak, negative and black world? That shows the sort of world that the Conservatives live and thrive in.

Sir Michael Spicer *rose—*

Mr. Nicholls *rose—*

Mr. Anderson: Let me move on.

Hon. Members: Give way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is not giving way.

Mr. Anderson: I shall talk mainly about enlargement. The intergovernmental conference is an essential prerequisite for enlargement. My right hon. Friend said yesterday that the British Government see the IGC as dealing essentially with the leftovers from Amsterdam. That is probably sensible because of the time constraint.

One of the frighteners that the hon. Member for Stratford–on–Avon put to us related to the Simon, Dehaene, von Weizsäcker report. It was commissioned by Mr. Prodi and the Helsinki council will pave the way for an intergovernmental conference, where the Commission has a subsidiary role. The report of the three wise men—we can call them what we will—is visionary and contains some useful matters for debate, but it will not be a key part of the IGC, which will have a more limited and sensible agenda.

Dr. Godman: My hon. Friend is talking about essential prerequisites for enlargement. Does he agree that radical and comprehensive reform of the common agricultural policy is essential for the development of an enlarged community? Where does Poland stand in the scheme of things? Are we to end up with a two-class system of membership because of a failure to reform the CAP?

Mr. Anderson: Taking a positive approach, my hon. Friend has put his finger on a key matter. For some, the CAP is the ark of the covenant or the high water mark of European advance. Many vested interests are involved. Sadly, we were not in Europe when it was devised to help to shape it to our advantage, but the lines along which CAP reform will proceed were, if not set in stone, at least set down at the March summit in Berlin. That package is largely to our advantage. There is no serious prospect of radical revision before the expiry of the seven-year term of the budget agreed at the Berlin summit in March. Poland will have formidable problems of adaptation but that will be after 2006, and we will need essential derogations or major transition periods prior to that to ease Poland into the EU.

On the European security and defence identity, I was at Chatham house when Strobe Talbott made that important speech. Of course there are fears within parts of the US Administration—and properly so—as to where this process might lead. Our vision is clear and is shared by some of key players within the EU, including the Dutch and others. Clearly, we will seek so to mould the new European defence identity that it will be relevant to Europe, and not so visionary as to be unreal.

[Mr. Anderson]

One of the major constraints is that European countries will not be prepared to pay the sort of money on their defence budgets which will make some of the visionary schemes practicable. However, one of the lessons of Kosovo is that there are real dangers that bush fires may start in areas such as the Balkans which neighbour Europe and which vitally affect European interests in terms, for example, of refugees, but on which we can do nothing or on which we are not prepared to help because the US, for various reasons, is not prepared to commit its own resources.

What is envisaged is not less US, but more Europe. There will be a preliminary stage at which the US decides whether it wishes to be engaged or not. Thereafter, clearly the sharing of assets will enable Europe—in a limited field, and on the tasks set down at Petersberg—to carry out tasks which are very much in the interests of the EU, but which we are not now capable of doing on our own.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): France is outside the integrated military structure, and has confirmed that it will remain so since 1966. We have now agreed to set up a joint military committee and military staff with France which, as night follows day, means that that will be outside the integrated military structure. Does that give the right hon. Gentleman cause for concern?

Mr. Anderson: It does not give the United States cause for concern because of the nature of the agenda that we are seeking. The United States has said that it would have reservations if the scheme went further along a particular road. It is our task, with the partners who share our views within Europe, to deal with this complex matter in such a way that it serves our interests and those of the Alliance as a whole. That is what the Government have set out to do.

Enlargements in the past have been, in part, for political reasons. The enlargements to encompass Spain, Portugal and Greece came after periods of dictatorship and sought to provide stability and democracy in those countries. I believe that the same motive is now relevant for the current six, and for the six who are likely to be endorsed at the Helsinki summit.

I very much agree with what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said yesterday about Cyprus. He said that we had hoped that the dynamic of Europe would provide a stimulus for a solution to the tragic division of that island. If it does not, we have made crystal clear that Turkey will not have a veto, and that the Republic of Cyprus—with all the complexities which will follow—will be eligible to join the European Union.

Slovenia was dealt with badly in its exclusion from NATO, and has been a victim of wider considerations. Slovenia—the most prosperous part of the old Yugoslavia, at the southern part of the Austrian Alps—is very much a democracy and should be able to glide into the European Union with no great difficulty.

Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary have always had a European vocation. I lived in Hungary en poste in our embassy for a couple of years, and I saw then—even under the darkest days of communism—the European vocation of Hungary, the historical spear point of Europe against the east.

Poland has made enormous strides and Estonia, as a result of its application and the pressures on it, has made crucial changes in respect of its Russian minority and its economy. I am glad that they will be joined in the second wave by Latvia and Lithuania, so that we can consider the Baltic countries as a whole. Latvia and Lithuania are relatively small. They are absorbable and have made serious democratic strides. As it is difficult, because of Russian sensitivities, to bring them into NATO, there is all the more reason to bring them into a European Union security structure so that, together with their Scandinavian sponsors, they can help to provide an acceptable buttress.

Sir Michael Spicer: That all presupposes greater centralisation and, as the Foreign Secretary said, dissipation of Britain's power at the centre of Europe. What evidence is there that the British public want that? This morning, I heard the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), saying on the radio that his battle bus campaign was a great success. Every time the battle bus gets outside the garage, public interest in the Government's proposals seems to plummet. What legitimacy does the proposed extension have?

Mr. Anderson: Expansion does not presuppose further centralisation. It will surely lead to greater diversification and more difficulty in finding the centralisation of which Conservative Front Benchers are so afraid. I have been involved in the European debate as a diplomat and in various other guises for many years and I am convinced that the British people are persuaded by facts. It is a fact that all other countries neighbouring Europe are desperately keen to clamber on board. They do not get frightened and run to nanny as Conservative Front Benchers do. They see the future for our continent in a positive way. It would be sad if the Conservative party were to run scared from Europe at a time when so many others want to join in a positive spirit.

Slovakia, after Meciar, is making enormous strides, and the Czech Republic is a ready sponsor. Malta has no serious problems and I hope that the Maltese Labour party will go through the same transformation as my own party. Stabilisation and democracy have been established in Romania and Bulgaria.

Clearly, differentiation is important. We cannot have the countries, either in the first six or in the following six, joining one by one, in part because of the ratification process. In national parliaments political constraints will arise, but we are talking about an historic and welcome task, which the British people will support, to widen and make more powerful the new Europe.

My right hon. Friend spelled out how, in the summit, we would respond to the withholding tax when it affects our interests but also spoke of how we would work positively with our European partners, because that too is in our interest.

5.38 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): It is clear that the principal issues that will be discussed in Helsinki will be enlargement, the related issue of the remit and terms of reference of the intergovernmental conference in 2000, and the European security and defence identity.

It would be a great pity if the withholding tax were allowed to overshadow the Helsinki summit, at which such important issues are to be discussed. There are more

important things to focus on, such as enlargement and the ESDI. The truth is that the withholding tax would not achieve the objective of stamping out tax evasion among European savers and could, as we have heard already, do substantial damage to London's international bond market. The solution for individual countries that have a problem with tax evasion is to reform their own domestic systems of assessment and collection. The bond market in London is worth £1.86 billion and it must not be allowed to be disturbed, as the New York market was some years ago when a similar proposal was made and carried through.

There is no reason, however, why we should not explore the possibility of a voluntary code on unfair tax competition, which is against the interests of a properly functioning single market. If it is also against the interests of UK exporters and manufacturers, we should do all that we can to ensure that unfair competition is removed. One can legitimately say of the withholding tax that it should simply be withheld.

It is right on such an occasion to ask what the purpose of enlargement is. It is easy to offer the answer that it is to provide for suitable candidates the economic opportunities of trading in a single market, but it is more than that. It is worth reminding ourselves of the purpose of the European Coal and Steel Community—the primary forerunner of the European Union—which grew out of the terrible maelstrom of Europe during the second world war. When we offer suitable candidates the opportunity to join the European Union—and NATO, too, for that matter—we offer them the chance to entrench the values of freedom and democracy that have emerged in those countries, rather as the countries have emerged blinking into the daylight like the prisoners in "Fidelio", sometimes from a period of impenetrable totalitarian darkness.

Those countries have fledgling democratic institutions, some just a few years old. Those institutions would be underpinned by membership of the European Union, and experience tells us that. It is inconceivable, for example, that Spain might revert to a Franco, Portugal to a Salazar, or Greece to a handful of colonels. Those countries' membership of the European Union inhibits any such regression.

We should be clear that negotiations to join the European Union must proceed on the basis of merit, not of compassion. The Copenhagen criteria, to which reference has already been made, must not be weakened or undermined for any one country, no matter how deserving it might appear to be in other respects. There is little doubt, as the Foreign Secretary rightly recognised, that Turkey poses an especial challenge. Some say that there should be no dialogue about the entry of Turkey until it obviously and clearly meets the Copenhagen criteria. Indeed, some Liberal Democrats say that any such dialogue without the criteria having been met would simply encourage the view that entry could be achieved at a lower standard, thus providing no incentive to change.

My own view is rather different in emphasis. We must recognise that the European Union's treatment of Turkey in the recent past has caused great resentment in that country. I am sympathetic to the view that dialogue on human rights and enhanced political exchanges—always with the prospect of membership—are more likely to be successful. They should be accompanied by the clear understanding that no matter what progress may have been made on some of those issues, and no matter how deserving in all other respects Turkey may be, the Copenhagen criteria will not be reduced or diluted. Turkey would also be well advised to consider the consequences for its legitimate aspiration to join the European Union if it were to proceed with the execution of Mr. Ocalan.

The issue of enlargement leads naturally to some consideration of the IGC of 2000. We must recognise that the conspicuous failure to prepare for European Union enlargement has created an enormous pressure for success at the IGC. As has already emerged in at least one exchange this afternoon, reform of the common agricultural policy is one of the matters that must be resolved.

Even if enlargement were not on the table, there would be compelling reasons for reform of the CAP, but those reasons are doubly compelling under the pressure of enlargement. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that, without reform of the CAP, there can be no enlargement.

However, every step taken by the IGC must be measured against the principle of subsidiarity. The EU should exercise powers and competencies only if the policy outcome is demonstrated to be more effective and efficient than could be achieved by member states acting individually. To put that in less complicated language: decisions should always be taken at the level where they are most likely to be effective.

I give way to the hon. Gentleman for the Scottish constituency.

Dr. Godman: My constituency is Greenock and Inverclyde. The right hon. and learned Gentleman said that there could be no EU enlargement without CAP reform. How optimistic is he that such reform will take place in the next two or three years?

Sir Teddy Taylor: No chance.

Dr. Godman: That embittered critic of the EU, the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor), shouts that there is no chance of that, but I directed my question to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell). Is he optimistic that CAP reform can take place in the next two or three years?

Mr. Campbell: I apologise for describing the hon. Gentleman as the "hon. Gentleman for the Scottish constituency". I suppose that I run the risk of equating him with "Macbeth", the Scottish play whose title is never mentioned: if I call him "the Scottish constituency", his name may never be mentioned again.

I have some anxiety about whether the CAP can be reformed, but enlargement cannot take place if it is not. The common agricultural policy cannot be sustained if the agricultural industries of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are admitted. Pressure will be applied from all directions to try and achieve CAP reform, but we must be realistic: if it is not achieved, enlargement will not take place. Europe sometimes does best when it is presented with a precipice and is able to respond to very considerable pressures. Without movement or change, what is on the table becomes impossible to attain.

Sir Michael Spicer: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell: No, I want to make progress.

[Mr. Campbell]

I was dealing with the question of subsidiarity. The Liberal Democrat party argues for a constitution for Europe, to define and limit the powers of European Union institutions, to clarify and simplify treaties, to enhance transparency—a matter about which I shall say more in due course—and to prevent the unnecessary accumulation of powers at the centre. A constitution would also set out the rights of individual citizens.

It is perhaps too much to expect the IGC to achieve all that in the year 2000, but it most certainly should begin that process. A constitution for Europe would provide a stable, legitimate and accepted framework for future development, but we must make Europe's institutions more democratic and accountable. It has already been hinted in the debate that we should start with a powerful freedom of information regime—as powerful as the regime that may be established in Scotland, and possibly rather more powerful than what appears to be proposed for the rest of the United Kingdom.

The European Parliament should have equal status in law making with the Council of Europe. It should also have the power to vet and veto the appointment of every Commissioner, and to dismiss individual Commissioners. The size and working methods of the Commission must be streamlined, and there needs to be the reweighting of votes to which the Foreign Secretary referred.

The procedures of the European Court of Justice must also be streamlined. Justice delayed is justice denied, in Europe as elsewhere. It would be ludicrous if the beef problem were to take two years to resolve because of the sclerotic nature of the procedures of the European Court of Justice. As a lawyer, I can argue with some justification that those procedures must be streamlined.

The Council should vote in public. There should be a presumption that its proceedings be public unless good cause is shown.

Mr. Bercow: The risible protocol on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality in the treaty of Amsterdam obliges member states to respect and uphold the existing institutional balance and acquis communautaire. Do the Liberal Democrats favour any change to those?

Mr. Campbell: I thought that I had made that clear. I set out the principles by which I thought that the intergovernmental conference should work, the strategic objectives that it should adopt and the elements of reform necessary to make the Community's institutions much more transparent and accountable. The strategy must be to decide how best we can entrench subsidiarity and define the limits of the European Union.

That takes me to the European security and defence identity. When we last discussed that only a week or 10 days ago, much of the debate centred around a rather fine textual exegesis of the speech that Mr. Strobe Talbott delivered in September in London. Many said that the speech was against the ESDI. Those who read it know that it clearly sets out that the United States Government support a European security and defence identity subject to a number of entirely reasonable and sensible conditions.

It sometimes appears to me that the visceral anti-Europeanism of some of our Conservatives prevents rational discussion of the future of European defence. Their contributions are confined to predictions of damage and detriment that are wholly unjustified by the facts or political reality. Let us suppose that the shadow Foreign Secretary is right that the Prime Minister's enthusiasm for the ESDI is related to his unwillingness to make the sort of commitment that we urge upon him in relation to the single European currency. If trading in Europe is to be condemned, there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that the previous Government acquiesced in the recognition of Slovenia in return for the right to opt out of the single currency.

Mr. Donald Anderson: Croatia

Mr. Campbell: I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon, it was Croatia. I do not know whether the second proposition is as inaccurate as the first.

Mr. Cash: It is true.

Mr. Campbell: An hon. Member who may be better informed than I am says that it is true. To accuse this Government of trading in Europe comes a little ill if there has been previous such trading.

We should not allow that to prevent us from considering the merits of the proposal. We criticised the Government's strategic defence review because it dealt dismissively with Europe in 11 or 12 lines. The position changed almost as we were debating it in the House. The Prime Minister was speaking elsewhere, or at least giving an interview to a journalist that appeared the day after the debate. He said that there had been a change in Government opinion. We welcome that change, because it was considerably in the direction of the policy position that we had often argued for.

I regard the joint paper agreed between the Government and the Liberal Democrats to which the Foreign Secretary referred as a sensible contribution to the debate. There was some amusement about that among Conservative Members but when the Maastricht treaty went through the House, the Whipping was, to say the least, robust. The famous book kept in the Conservative Whips Office was well thumbed. I do not remember the Conservative Government objecting to the fact that in almost every vote of significance, they enjoyed Liberal Democrat support.

NATO remains, and must remain, the bedrock of United Kingdom and European security. It is our collective defence. Europe's security would not be enhanced in any way by allowing the transatlantic relationship to be dismantled. The ESDI will succeed if it increases the operational effectiveness of European forces within NATO. It should allow European forces to act alone when the United States is unable or unwilling to contribute forces to joint actions.

The taxpayers of Europe will get better value from their defence budgets if their Governments work more closely together. In some cases, possibly under the influence of the defence capability initiative launched at the Washington summit earlier this year, Governments may have to seek to increase those budgets.

An effective ESDI can strengthen NATO and redistribute the burden of European security. It can answer the paradox whereby the United States calls on the

Europeans to do more for themselves but when the Europeans show signs of doing so, the Americans feel that they are excluded. If the ESDI is to work, it requires a comprehensive European defence review.

We have some idea of where Europe is deficient: heavy lift, intelligence gathering, deployable forces, advanced technology weapons and joint command and control structures. We need a coherent strategy to address those shortcomings. We can take that agenda forward through the European defence review. subject to the following qualifications: all parties with an interest are consulted; all nations are involved and understand their responsibilities; there is no infringement of the national interests of member states; and we ensure that NATO is not undermined.

Conservative opposition to the ESDI is increasingly well documented. The Foreign Secretary, in what was then the absence of the Conservative defence spokesman, drew attention to the fact that he had gone abroad and given evidence that, on the face of it, was contrary to a Government policy. When he wondered what the consequences might have been if that had happened under the previous Government, I could not but think of the indignation that the then right hon. Member for Finchley, Baroness Thatcher, would have shown. Those of us who sat through those occasions when she was, shall we say, dismissive of Neil Kinnock, can only wonder how dismissive she would have been if it had come to light that a member of the Labour party had gone to Washington and given evidence before a congressional committee contrary to the policy of the then Government. That puts the matter into perspective.

What is absent from the debate is a genuine effort by the Conservatives to provide us with an alternative. I made this point 10 days ago. I am not still not clear from what the shadow Foreign Secretary said how he thinks that the relationship within NATO should be rebalanced or what assessment he has made of the likelihood of the United States playing a prominent a part in any future action as it did in Kosovo. How does he think that Europe should equip itself to cope with obligations that arise if and when the United States declines to become involved?

I see nothing suspicious in the joint declaration after the Anglo-French summit. It makes it clear that NATO is to remain the foundation of collective defence and that we are seeking autonomous capacity for the EU to launch and conduct EU-led military operations where the alliance as a whole is not engaged.

Some argue, particularly in the United States, that NATO should be given the right of first refusal. That proposition is worth exploring for two reasons. First, it emphasises the primacy of NATO. Secondly, if NATO is given the right of first refusal, it will compel the United States to make its mind up quicker and earlier than it was willing to in Bosnia or Kosovo, where American reluctance and reticence was very damaging to the joint effort, at least in the first instance.

So long as what we achieve contains no unnecessary duplication, does not discriminate against non-European Union members of NATO such as Norway and Turkey or against neutral members of the EU who are not members of NATO and there is no decoupling of the United States, the ESDI makes sense. It may not be a revolution, but it certainly makes common sense.

We have had a demonstration again this evening of the increasingly sceptical position that the Conservative party takes in relation to the European Union. The Foreign Secretary has already pointed up that rather unambiguous passage in the speech of the leader of the Conservative party at his conference, when he said that the new treaty must contain a flexibility clause, or there would be no new treaty. As the Foreign Secretary rightly said, if there is no new treaty, there will be no enlargement. The words of the leader of the Conservative party did not so much draw a line in the sand as build a pretty impenetrable fortress. One cannot resist the observation that the loudest cheers at the Conservative party conference were for those who argued for complete withdrawal from Europe. That is rather close, some might think, to the policy of the UK Independence party.

It is now possible to ask the question which, as I said last week, was previously unthinkable. Are there circumstances in which, under a Conservative Government, Britain would seek to withdraw from the European Union? That tells us a great deal, but in particular it tells us why it would certainly not be in the interests of the United Kingdom for the Conservative party to represent us at Helsinki or any other EU summit for the foreseeable future.

6.1 pm

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I am grateful to have been called so early in the debate. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) and to have heard the other speakers in the debate, all of whom were positive, with the exception of the shadow Foreign Secretary, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples). It is disappointing for Britain that there is a great divide within the Conservative party on Europe. In France, Italy, Germany and other European partner countries, there is not that divide. At Helsinki and other summits, their Governments have had the backing of their Parliaments in their negotiating stance, whereas the British Government go there with the Opposition unwilling to take part in developing that national consensus.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Williams: Not this early in my comments.

My position on Europe has been one of slow persuasion. Back in 1975, I voted no in the referendum. I supported our policy in 1983, but accepted that there had been a change for the 1987 election, when I entered Parliament. I will never forget the statement that Baroness Thatcher made on her return from the Rome summit in 1990. I was sitting where the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) is sitting now. Baroness Thatcher's manic anti-Europeanism in her statement that afternoon made the penny drop for me for the first time. Her Euro-scepticism was nothing more than pure undiluted English nationalism. As the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) knows, I have spent the past 20 years fighting Welsh nationalism in my constituency. That afternoon, I felt that I had not fought Welsh nationalism at home to come here and adopt English nationalism from Baroness Thatcher or whomever.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The hon. Gentleman will recall that I voted yes in the referendum in 1975.

[Mr. Dafydd Wigley]

He may not agree with the politics of Plaid Cymru in detail, but does he accept that we do not have xenophobic politics that close our minds and make us turn our back on the European dimension, which is so important to us all?

Mr. Williams: That is also true of the Scottish National party. I am pleased that there is a wide pro-European consensus in Wales and Scotland. We do not have any Conservative Members representing Wales and Scotland in Parliament. Unfortunately, the membership of the Conservative party drives it more and more into English nationalism. The Conservative party does a disservice to the country and ultimately to itself. For at the next election, the electorate will have nothing to do with this rampant anti-Europeanism.

Dr. Godman: In trying to be fair minded, I point out that many Scottish Conservatives, even though there are none in this place, are much more positive in their approach to the European Union than that lot on the Opposition Benches, as I am sure the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) will agree.

Mr. Williams: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those remarks.

My dramatic change of view happened on hearing the comments by Baroness Thatcher in 1990 after the Rome summit. Unknown to me, that very afternoon no less than the then Foreign Secretary, now Lord Howe of Aberavon, was equally hurt and he resigned within two weeks—and within weeks, Baroness Thatcher was out of office. From 1992 to 1997, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) was Prime Minister and his big problem throughout his premiership was holding his party together on the European issue. Since 1997, the pro-Europeans within the party have given up the ghost; they have allowed the sceptics to take over. The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the recently elected right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) and all the influences within the Conservative party are leading the Tories like lemmings to the precipice.

Dr. Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way on my second attempt. According to the hon. Gentleman, one minute the Conservative party is deeply divided, and the next, it has given way to one side. Is it not a fact that the Conservative party is in line with 64 per cent. of the British people, who have made it clear that they do not want Britain to abandon the pound and replace it with the euro? We are united to the point that 84 per cent. of our members support the leadership's policy.

Mr. Williams: I shall come shortly to some comments on the single currency, but the Conservative party is moving towards a position of wanting to renegotiate—that is the word that it uses—which is just a euphemism for withdrawal. It is moving rapidly towards withdrawal.

I have read comments made at the Conservative conference by the shadow Foreign Secretary and the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who is also a Conservative Front-Bench spokesman. They said that the alternative was to pull out of the EU. That is seriously being considered in certain Conservative quarters.

I return to the Government's line on the EU. Since May 1997, there has been much more constructive and positive engagement with our European partners. It is clearly our intent, over one or two Governments, to move to being at the heart of Europe in all its deliberations.

In his speech to the Lord Mayor's banquet a couple of weeks ago, the Prime Minister described Britain as a pivotal power in world affairs. In the past 12 months, we were influential in big decisions taken on the war in Kosovo. We helped not only to move British opinion, but to lead European opinion on what had to be done to bring Serbian atrocities to an end. We have influence not only in NATO, but in the United Nations and Europe—but before we can become that pivotal power, we have to join the single currency at some stage. When the economic pointers are in the right direction, it is the Government's intention—subject to the five economic tests—to join the single currency. I am a strong supporter, notwithstanding my realisation that, at present, the general public are wary and sceptical; possibly even 2:1 against joining.

I notice that the Confederation of British Industry is not against joining the single currency. Many leading businesses realise that, at some time in the future, we have to cross the rubicon. Next month, we look forward to a statement on our progress towards convergence. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor is running the economy extremely well; I understand that his public support rating is now ahead of that of the Prime Minister. The general public realise that the Chancellor has cleared up the problems that were left to us, and ensured that the accounts are in surplus. We have economic growth and stability and the prospects for the economy are extremely good.

My one criticism of our economic policy is the problem of the strong pound. As international confidence in Britain is so high, we attract speculators' money, which has driven up the value of the pound to unrealistic rates. That gives three spin-offs. The first is that there are great difficulties for manufacturers and for agriculture. In a sense, that has created a north-south divide. The service sector has not been particularly badly hit, but, during the past year, manufacturing has been affected by the strong pound.

The second relates to the balance of payments, where there are substantial problems that will become more apparent next year and in the following year. There will be difficulties in financing our trade because of those in-flows and out-flows. Thirdly, and most seriously, there will be problems for our membership of the euro. If there was a referendum on membership tomorrow, our membership would be unsustainable with the pound at its present level. We need the pound to fall by at least 10 to 15 per cent. against the deutschmark—to about DM2.60 or DM2.70. In a sense, I am critical of the Government's policy, although some matters are not directly under the control of the Chancellor or of the Monetary Policy Committee. However, problems are presented by the high value of the pound.

In autumn 2001, if we win the next election—as we are confident of doing—we shall review our position on membership of the single currency. During the two years until then, much could change, and that will help to change public opinion. The European economy is recovering. The European Commission's projections for next year anticipate that the European economy will grow by 3 per cent. That will help the value of the euro.

The EC's projections for the UK are even better than those of the Chancellor—it estimates 3.4 per cent. growth next year and 3.6 per cent. for the following year.

Mr. Bercow: In the light of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, will he confirm that further cession of sovereignty on fiscal policy would not, for him, represent a constitutional objection to British entry to the euro?

Mr. Williams: I see no political problem with membership of the single currency, but I am not going into any philosophical ideas beyond that. I can see no constitutional obstacle. Of the 15 members of the EU, 11 are currently members of the euro and have encountered no problems. All the indications are that Denmark, Sweden and Greece are moving towards joining the single currency. If we could join the currency at about the same time as those three countries, it would be in the interests of the people of Britain and, indeed, of the people of Europe.

The one problem—these comments are addressed more to my colleagues on the Treasury Bench than to the Opposition—is that we have promised to hold a referendum on joining the single currency. In the European elections, turnout in this country was only about 20 or 25 per cent., although the turnout of 41 per cent. in my constituency was the highest in Britain. I fear that those absurdly low turnout figures would be repeated in a referendum on the single currency. In that case, what interpretation could we put on such a referendum?

There is a parallel with the referendum on devolution held in Wales two years ago. Sadly, the turnout was only 50 per cent., and the vote in favour was barely 50 per cent. That is not a powerful mandate—I would have preferred an 80 per cent. turnout, and an 80 per cent. yes vote, but it was only 50 per cent. of 50 per cent. When we hold the referendum on the single currency, there will not be a 50 per cent. turnout, even though there may be a 50 per cent. vote in favour of joining. I wonder whether the result of such a referendum should be binding—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"]—I put that as a constitutional question.

In 1976, there was no problem with the referendum on the renegotiations of our terms of membership of the EU; there was a good turnout and a yes vote. However, I leave my colleagues on the Treasury Bench with the question of whether we need to reconsider our policy on the referendum.

The Conservative party lets itself down and lets the country down by so crazily taking an anti-European direction. If the Conservatives want to win back any of the people of Wales and Scotland, they should drop their appalling English nationalism. The Government are doing extremely well in Europe—working with our partners and making progress. However, I should like us to make faster progress towards the single currency, so that, in 10 years time, we will be pivotal not only in the Commonwealth and NATO, but in the European Union.

6.18 pm

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): I am sorry that my English nationalism offended the hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams). However, to reply in all sincerity to his extremely fair speech, I hope that he will realise how much his comments will have offended those who believe in democracy.

The hon. Gentleman said that Labour is committed to a referendum on the single currency; the signs are that there may not be a full turnout; and the result will probably go the wrong way, so perhaps we should disregard it. I have heard speeches from many strange people, but I think that the hon. Gentleman is a sincere person and I hope that, on reflection, he will realise that it is appalling to state that something should be disregarded because the result might go the wrong way, especially as this is the end of the road. I hope he realises that if we were to join the single currency, there would no longer be much point in the good people of Wales voting at all, whether they were to vote for the splendid Welsh nationalists, the Labour party or even the Conservatives.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will also reconsider his view that one can join the single currency with no effect whatever on one's tax affairs. Hon. Members should listen not only to English nationalists such as myself but to the president of the Bundesbank, Mr. Tietmeyer. The other day he said:

> "A European currency will lead to member nations transferring their sovereignty over financial and wage policies as well as in monetary affairs."

But here is the key part of his statement:

> "It is an illusion to think that states can hold onto their autonomy over taxation policies."

Indeed, it is an illusion. There is no way that a single currency could work for Europe unless there was co-ordination of taxation policies and regional aid policies.

If the hon. Gentleman doubts that, he should ask himself whether there has ever been a successful single currency anywhere in the world. The answer is no; no such currency has ever worked. It has been tried time and again, and it simply cannot work unless—as in the case of the United States—it covers an area with one Government, one Treasury, one policy of handing out money and a feeling of nationhood.

Currency unions have been tried twice in Europe—the Scandinavian currency union and the Latin currency union. Both failed. It has been tried elsewhere.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): The most notable example of a single currency that has worked, which seems to have escaped the hon. Gentleman's attention, is the dollar, which prevails throughout the 50 states of the United States.

Sir Teddy Taylor: I was making that very argument. A currency union can work in an area such as the United States, where there is one Government, one Treasury, a system of aid and a feeling of nationhood. Does the hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr realise how different things are in Europe?

Let us consider the issue of taxation and wages. I obtained some figures that I thought might be of interest to the average person. If a person on a salary of £12,000 lives in the USA, he keeps 83 per cent. of his salary. If he lives in Britain, where we have a splendid new Government, he keeps 80 per cent. If he lives in France, where they also have a splendid Labour Government, he keeps 73 per cent. If he lives in Germany, he keeps 66 per cent. That is a huge difference.

If we move to a higher level of £25,000—I believe that the hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr may know more people like that—a person would keep

[Sir Teddy Taylor]

78 per cent. of his salary in America, 73 per cent. in Britain, 67 per cent. in France and only 55 per cent. in Germany. It is simply not possible to have a kind of harmony between nations with such a huge variation in taxation.

Let us take overall taxation. The hon. Gentleman will know that there is a wide variation between the 44 per cent. of GDP that goes to tax in Europe and the 36 per cent. in Britain. Although single currencies have never worked when they cover an area with different countries and different Governments, the chances of such a currency working in Europe are even smaller.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way to me as someone who has respected the fact that, on this issue, he has been singing the same song for much more than 20 years. Is he aware that the chief economist of the European central bank, a gentleman by the name of Dr. Otmar Issing, has said in support of his thesis that there is

"no example in history of a lasting monetary union that was not linked to political union"?

Sir Teddy Taylor: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I just hope that people who support the single currency in Europe will realise that. We are not trying to be difficult and to be English nationalists. We are saying that people will be in terrible trouble because when single currencies are established, we always end up with a great deal of unemployment and misery. Often there is disruption too, because, sadly, part of the area experiences strong economic growth while another part suffers deep recession, resulting in terrible trouble.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: It strikes me that the hon. Gentleman's argument is not so much about whether Britain should join the single currency, but that the single currency is destined to fall apart anyway. I accept that the euro has had a difficult first year, but what if, in three or five years' time, that single currency turns out to be a resounding success? Is he saying that Britain should still not join it?

Sir Teddy Taylor: I would have to feel very like Jonah. The book of Jonah is one of my most popular readings in the Bible. It is a good lesson in humility for any Member of Parliament, or for anyone who thinks that he knows anything, to read about Jonah. Poor old Jonah went around telling all the people that Nineveh was going to be destroyed; and then God changed his mind, and poor old Jonah, having given up a great deal—I have given 25 years to fighting against the European Community—learned a lesson in humility. It would be terrible but a very good lesson in humility, and I would be happy for the people of Europe and the people of Britain.

I repeat in all sincerity: I have been screaming and shouting and making a nuisance of myself for a long time, with others, saying certain things; and the trouble is that, to date, we have been right. To date, an awful lot of deplorable things have happened, and an awful lot of people have suffered a great deal as a consequence.

I give the hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr one silly example. I remember when we were about to join the exchange rate mechanism. I am not saying that I am clever; I am saying that we must start to look at things as they are, instead of being carried away by nonsensical slogans. At ERM time, everyone thought that the ERM was great. The Government at the time, who probably were not Labour—I cannot really remember—said that the ERM would bring us growth and stability. All the top organisations of the world, including the Confederation of British Industry—which I am sure gets a Euro-grant for saying such things—said that if we joined the ERM it would bring growth and stability, and that things would be great. A few silly twits like myself—the English nationalists—were saying, "This will inevitably bring artificial happiness or artificial misery." That was obvious. It was not that we were clever; it was obvious that that would happen.

What did happen? Five hundred thousand good people—many of whom were in Wales, I am sure—had to be put out of work because of that nonsense. We had to spend piles and piles of money supporting our currency at an illogical, nonsensical level, and ultimately it was a crisis—a disaster. We even had to have a poor old Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer making himself look silly and apparently disagreeing with the Prime Minister, which was very, very sad indeed.

Mr. Bercow: Would my hon. Friend care to recall the sage observation of the Eritrean ambassador to the United States—whose country, after a long and bloody conflict with Ethiopia, came to mint its own coinage—that:

"An independent nation with its own policies needs its own currency to implement its decisions"?

Sir Teddy Taylor: How right he was.

I am genuinely not trying to cause political disruption or to attack the Government. I simply ask them please to consider that whenever we have said things like this, we have been proved right.

I remember hearing optimistic statements, such as those made by the hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr, when we held a referendum on our membership of the European Economic Community. I think of the farmers who are constantly on to Members of Parliament. There are many farmers in my present constituency, which is not very nice for them. I have them all coming at me. I keep reminding them that, many years ago, they were told that they would have a wonderful time if the United Kingdom joined the EEC, and that it would be great. They were all for it then—just like the fishermen in Scotland. They have indeed had a wonderful time, but inevitably such a situation creates oversupply.

There is now a massive oversupply of food, and no one knows what to do about it. It is not that Governments or organisations are being nasty. The EU spends massive amounts—larger than ever—on agriculture, as do the UK Government and others. We are simply spending lots of money on dumping and destroying food, and in the meantime the farmers are getting deeper and deeper into trouble.

What can we do? The answer is nothing. We have massive oversupply, and if we were ever to extend the European Union and bring in delightful countries such as Poland and Romania, which would love to join and take advantage of the common agricultural policy, it would simply make things worse.

I know that the farmers are delightful—they tell me so all the time—nice, decent, respectable people, but what can we say when we meet them? We can try to con them, but we are wasting our time if we do. It is the same with the fishermen. I remember that I originally came from a place called Scotland, although I am an English nationalist. During discussions on the referendum, I could not find one Scottish fishermen to support the no campaign; but when I go to Scotland now, I find that all the fishermen hate the EEC. They did have a great time, but it has caught up with us, and now the poor old fishermen are being ground into the dust and cannot find any income or prospects. It is a horrible situation. I just wish that people would face up to it.

I have heard all the arguments. We were told time and again that membership of the EEC would be great. We know that it has been a disaster for our trade, with a total deficit of more than £150 million. We have heard, too, about how the CAP would be reformed, but it is not being reformed and cannot be reformed. We have heard that Europe will be tough on fraud, but we know that Europe is hopeless at dealing with fraud, and that there is no chance of that.

I may have mentioned to one or two colleagues that the thing that really offended me was hearing about the gentleman from Liverpool, a convicted criminal, who received a grant of £140,000 from the European Union to try to improve the social situation of prostitutes in Hungary, who were very much neglected. What upsets me is that he never did anything for the prostitutes—they are still as neglected as ever—but bought two new cars and a new house. I find that type of thing appalling.

Those who believe that they can find easy answers are kidding themselves. I believe that the worst are the National Farmers Union. I even heard that the NFU approached a very respectable supermarket in Britain, whose name I cannot remember, and said, "Because we have so much meat on sale, we must get you to tear up your contracts with that wonderful country called New Zealand"—which has always helped us if we are in trouble—"and stop selling New Zealand lamb." The supermarket did what it was told, which was horrifying—one of these days I will remember its name. However, when one thinks of what New Zealand has done for us when we have been in trouble, it is shameful and shocking that that supermarket stopped selling New Zealand lamb simply because there is a glut of meat in Europe. I wish people would realise their obligations.

If we accept that those who have complained about the EU in the past and English nationalists have regrettably been proven right to a small degree, can we not at least ask the Government of whichever party—I am not sure who will be in power next year—to think carefully about the fact that for the first time Europe has gone too far and is about to suffer major problems? The first problem is the single currency. I know that Ministers are cautious and say, "We know that the euro has gone down some way, but don't worry, it will come up again." However, it will not, because international people do not and cannot have confidence it.

If the Liberal Democrats doubt what I say, they should consider the figures for 30-year bonds that I obtained yesterday. Let us take the example of someone like a Chief Whip who is rich and has access to funds. If he puts money in a 30-year bond in Britain, he will receive only 4.78 per cent. in interest from the bank, which is not very much. In Germany, he would get 6.06 per cent. and in France he would get even more—6.14 per cent. What does that tell us? It tells us that, for 30-year bonds, international money markets say that we should avoid the euro like the plague, but that Britain is quite good even with its splendid Labour Government and the possibility of an English nationalist Conservative Government taking office after that. International money markets do not have confidence in the currency and it will continue to decline. Even though we shall receive help from our friends from Japan who have kindly said that they will try to prop up the euro—I know that they will do everything possible to help us—that will not be enough. We cannot buck the market; we are heading for a major problem.

If such a problem arises, what on earth will Europe and the British Government do? We are interested in the success of Europe and we want it to be successful. Therefore, it is desperately important that the Government and Europeans should consider what they will do if the euro continues to go wrong. If it does, that will affect not only people with money but those with jobs. The question, I am afraid, is serious.

The second problem is the expansion of the European Union. I honestly do not think that people realise the extent to which that will create a dramatic crisis if it goes ahead without a fundamental reform of the common agricultural policy, which is not possible. Those who think that they can reform the CAP are simply kidding themselves. Instead of being carried away as they probably will be with the idea of expanding the EU, they should realise that that is not possible.

My final point is about the Commission. Critics of the EU have constantly pointed out that its whole structure is so undemocratic that it leads to a great deal of unfairness, fraud, mismanagement and misdirection of public money. We have said that over and again, but not because the Commission is made up of bad or nasty people. The structure of the Commission is such that if we kick them all out, as we did this year, and bring in a new crowd of 30 saints, the same problems will arise. Mr. Prodi is now in charge of the Commission. He is a rather unusual person and perhaps not a saint—I am sure that none of us here are. However, the Commission's structure is such that we will face a crisis.

I congratulate the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what he did in the discussions on tax and savings, but I hope that he will not cave in at the Helsinki summit. I also hope that he will listen to those whose arguments have been borne out by events and that he will accept that Europe may be heading for a great crisis. We should be concerned just as much about Europe as we are for ourselves. I hope that people will think about the points I have made, because I genuinely think that they are true.

6.34 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. The most important issue on the agenda at Helsinki will be enlargement. We have a moral and a practical responsibility to push forward enlargement as quickly as possible. We have a moral responsibility because, for decades, we lectured the former eastern bloc countries about the need to move to democracy. When they have done that, it would be wrong and irresponsible for us not to acknowledge that and to bring those countries into membership.

[Mr. Bill Rammell]

We have a practical responsibility involving our own self-interest and security interests. The real danger following the cold war is that of a continued division in Europe between those nations that are permanently rich and those that are permanently poor. The permanent exclusion of some countries will create the threats of illegal migration, a growing drugs trade and a degree of political instability that is not in this country's interests. That is why enlargement is crucial and should not be just a pious aspiration.

We must will the means as well as the ends. That is why the agenda for the intergovernmental conference must be set firmly in place at the Helsinki summit. We must pick up on what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary described as the leftovers from the Amsterdam summit, but they are large leftovers and we must get to grips with the problems quickly. We must bring the decision-making structures and the institutional structures of the European Union, which were originally designed for six countries, up to a standard that can cope with an EU of 20, 25 or more countries.

That will involve considering the size of the Commission, the reweighting of votes and a further extension of qualified majority voting. There is a strong argument for reforming the voting system. The point has already been made—it is worth repeating—that if enlargement takes place without reform of the voting system, we will be in the indefensible position in which the countries that represent the majority of the population of the EU would not be able to muster a blocking minority under qualified majority voting. We cannot support that. Clearly national sensitivities are involved and votes cannot accurately reflect the size of populations. However, there must be movement towards the larger nations. To put it crudely, Britain, Germany, France, Italy and Spain must have proportionately more votes.

In any organisation—the EU is no different in this respect—achieving such change would mean us offering something in return. Therefore, along with the other larger countries, we should consider giving up one of our Commissioners, so that each country has, at this stage, one Commissioner. I would however like to go further than that, and I would welcome the comments of Ministers on this subject. It has not been fleshed out in the past.

If the EU is ultimately made up of 25 or 30 nation states, it will be preposterous to have 25 or 30 Commissioners. There are only portfolios for 12 or 15 Commissioners. The devil makes work for idle hands, so if we accept the proposal to have 25 or 30 Commissioners, we will create the impression—and often the reality—of excessive bureaucracy. Too many people will be trying to do the same jobs, and that is an impediment to decent decision making in the European Commission.

If we stick to the notion that every country must have a Commissioner, we shall support the false notion that the Commission is a quasi-Government. Although I am strongly pro-European—it is in Britain's interests to be in the EU—I am not in favour of a federal Europe. Dealing with that issue sooner rather than later is in all our interests. For the next wave of entrants, we could accept the proposition that every country has one Commissioner, but at a later date—possibly in 2009 or 2010—we should limit the number of Commissioners to, for example, 20. That would be a sensible move.

Clearly, we would have to consider what to do when there are more than 20 member states. It would be perfectly proper, in those circumstances, to consider a system of rotating Commissioners from the different nation states, and the focus of decision making would then be on the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. That would be a far more effective way of dealing with the democratic deficit and of beginning to explain to people what influence they have over decisions in the European Union.

At the intergovernmental conference and in the discussions at Helsinki, we need to address the issue of extending qualified majority voting. In the right circumstances and on the right issues, that is a perfectly sensible arrangement and could be in our national interest. The Conservatives extended qualified majority voting 42 times while they were in office. Either they were going through an 18-year temporary loss of their senses—which is always a possible explanation—or they realised that it was in Britain's interest to extend that procedure on certain issues. I therefore support the Government's position that there are certain areas in which it is in our interest to be prepared to consider such an extension.

I strongly make the point that an extension is not against the national interest. When the Foreign Secretary opened the debate, he gave some figures that I shall expand on. He said that last year under QMV, we lost a vote on only two out of 213 occasions, and so far this year, we have not lost a vote on any of 181 occasions. The idea, therefore, that QMV is not in this country's interest is simply not borne out by the facts, and we should use it to stop other countries unreasonably blocking reforms that are in our interest.

We need to focus on the reform of the Commission, where Neil Kinnock is doing sterling work, but we need also to consider what we should do when there is clear evidence that individual Commissioners have been involved in misconduct and have committed an act that brings them and their political office into disrepute. There should be a clear and readily understood mechanism for dealing with that.

In securing the nomination of the existing Commission, President Prodi secured an informal right to dismiss Commissioners on the basis of the personal undertakings of the commissioners who were the nominees in 1999. There is a strong, or at least arguable, case that we should go further and enshrine that right in the treaty so that it is clear that if misconduct occurs, there is a mechanism to deal with it. I heard the shadow Foreign Secretary say that the matter should be left to the Council of Ministers. Considering what happened last year, however, I do not think that that is an effective mechanism, and we should consider including a provision in the treaty.

Offstage at the council, there will also be bilateral discussions with the French Government about the continuing beef crisis and their refusal to lift their ban. I hope, however, that the matter will be resolved shortly. Let me make it clear that there is no dispute between hon. Members on either side of the House—the French Government are clearly in the wrong. The scientific evidence is overwhelming, and the changes that have taken place mean that British beef is among the safest in the world. The key dispute is not about interpreting the French Government's position but about how we resolve the problem, get the beef ban lifted and stop the French Government blocking our exports.

I argue, as do the Government, that our only leverage over the French is our membership of the European Union, because a set of legal rights and responsibilities gives us influence. It is worth repeating that outside the European Union, 60 countries are imposing a ban on British beef and there is nothing whatsoever that we can do about that. Australia, Canada and the United States of America all oppose lifting the ban on British beef, and we can do nothing.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Is my hon. Friend arguing that an elected sovereign Government do not have the right to introduce selective import controls?

Mr. Rammell: We have the right to adopt selective import controls, but that is a dangerous course because we regularly export £10 billion of goods to the European Union, and only British exports and jobs would be the losers.

I am glad that my hon. Friend asked that question because it leads me on to my next point. Conservative Members have argued that we should ignore the rules and the legal situation, and simply begin a trade war by imposing an illegal ban on French imports. As I said, our exports and jobs would be at risk. There is a history to the Tory tactics on that issue. At the beginning of the beef dispute, when the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) was Prime Minister, there was a time when he said "We shall not accept this. We shall not agree to any European Union decision until the issue is resolved." He said just that on 21 May 1996, and then humiliatingly climbed down on 21 June 1996.

That underlines that such tactics do not help us to make progress, or protect and pursue the British national interest. We should continue to do as we are doing and use the rules that apply by dint of our EU membership, while pursuing the French diplomatically so that we can get the ban lifted sooner rather than later.

At Helsinki, there will also be a substantial debate about the withholding tax. Some people, including many Conservative Members, will say that it is the thin end of the tax harmonisation wedge and that if we join the single currency, we will be on a slippery slope and eventually all tax rates will be set in Brussels. There is no evidence to substantiate that allegation. Certainly, nothing in the Maastricht treaty implies that there must be centrally set and co-ordinated tax rates. There is a 3 per cent. limit on Government deficit as a proportion of gross domestic product, but individual nation states still retain the right to comply with that limit by using either high tax, high spend policies or low tax, low spend policies.

Earlier, we discussed countries that share a single currency but do not have harmonised tax rates. The United States is the most obvious example. Contrary to popular Euro-sceptic myth, there is no great desire among other European Union nations to push for further tax harmonisation. A Conservative Member referred to corporation tax earlier in the debate. The Italian Finance Minister is on the record as saying, last December, that harmonisation of corporation tax would be untimely, questionable and, above all, hardly feasible. The Spanish Prime Minister has made it clear on a number of occasions that he is opposed to a single tax rate because it would be a recipe for inefficiency. The Conservative party's argument that there is a great momentum towards having unified tax rates throughout the European Union does not stand up to detailed scrutiny.

In principle, the withholding tax is logical because its purpose is to tackle tax evasion—a notion that I should have thought we would all support. However, the current proposal is seriously flawed. Like some hon. Members who spoke earlier, I believe that there is a danger that we will drive capital out of Europe. There are many issues that should be dealt with in the nation state and many that should be dealt with at a European Union level, but tax evasion should be tackled at an international level, across the board. I welcome the fact that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is currently considering the issue.

If the withholding tax proposal makes further progress, however, the best way to proceed is to have banking transparency, which I know that the Government are proposing as an alternative. I hope that we can convince our European partners on that issue.

Let us be absolutely clear: the withholding tax is a specific proposal, not the thin end of the wedge of broader tax harmonisation. That disagreement has arisen is not a huge problem. I believe in Britain's membership of the EU, but I am not in favour of a federal Europe. It is inevitable that, from time to time, substantive disagreements will erupt between different EU countries. When legitimate disagreement arises, it is important that it is not used as a stick to beat the very principle of the EU, as some Conservative Members would like. In addition, we should be careful that disagreement does not occur too often, because that might damage and undermine our negotiating position on other issues.

Mr. Wells: The withholding tax would affect not only the London bond market, but Jersey, Guernsey, the Isle of Man and many Caribbean territories, including British overseas territories. They are not involved in tax evasion or other acts currently deemed illegal, but their markets would go out of business if the withholding tax were to be imposed.

Mr. Rammell: That is why I do not support the withholding tax as currently formulated. However, I sincerely believe that we have to tackle the issue of people investing income and profits overseas and not properly paying tax due within their own country. The issue cannot be tackled solely within the EU, because of the danger of flight of capital. It should be dealt with internationally, so I welcome the OECD's consideration of the issue.

We as a nation should make clear at Helsinki our fundamental commitment to Britain's membership of the European Union because membership is manifestly in our interests. More than 50 per cent. of our trade in goods and services is with other EU countries; eight of Britain's top 10 trade countries are EU countries; 3.5 million British jobs and one seventh of all UK income and production depend on sales to European countries.

Mr. Nicholls: The hon. Gentleman is generous in giving way. Why does he believe that, were we to be outside the EU or to have a more remote relationship with it, Europe would erect some sort of trade barrier around us in revenge? Is it not fanciful to suppose that, if we were to negotiate with Europe, not stridently, and succeed in establishing a relationship with which we all feel comfortable, all trade would be cut off at a stroke?

Mr. Rammell: I do not think it fanciful. If we were to withdraw, significant impediments and barriers to British

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goods would be erected by those who are currently our partners. It is fascinating to note that the hon. Gentleman's question clearly implies that there is now a substantial body of opinion on the Conservative Benches that is not merely Euro-sceptic, but fundamentally hostile to Europe and in favour of Britain's complete withdrawal from the EU.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rammell: I shall happily give way to one of those hon. Members who hold those views.

Mr. Bercow: I always enjoy listening to the hon. Gentleman's orations, but he strikes me as a rather slippery specimen on this issue. He says that he opposes a federal Europe, but does he agree with the President of the European Commission, who is on the record as having stated recently:

"The euro will inevitably lead to closer and closer integration of countries' economic policies . . . This demands that member states give up more sovereignty."?

Is the President right or wrong to say that?

Mr. Rammell: I do not agree with that proposition. In reply to the accusation that I am slippery, I can only say that people in glass houses should not throw stones. I take the accusation on the chin.

The degree to which our fortunes are tied to those of the EU was highlighted by the great non-appearance of the Leader of the Opposition's flat-bed truck. The House will remember that, when the Britain in Europe campaign was launched, the right hon. Gentleman said that he intended to tour Britain in a flat-bed truck, denouncing the single currency, all its evils and all its ills. He said that the details of the lorry would be available within a week, but six weeks have passed and we have heard nothing. Apparently, the reason for the delay is that the right hon. Gentleman has discovered that the only such trucks available are made by companies in receipt of foreign investment and he wants to avoid the embarrassment of travelling in such a truck.

That is all good knockabout fun—it is good to have a laugh at the expense of the Conservatives and their leader. However, the importance of that story is that it underlines certain facts. Yes, there are in this country four firms that produce trucks, all of which are derived from foreign investment. However, 2,200 British people derive their livelihood and income from those firms, and their jobs would be put at risk if we followed the Conservative policy of withdrawing from the EU.

Sir Teddy Taylor: We are having a serious discussion and want to avoid party games. Therefore, will the hon. Gentleman tell the House what happened to the two European countries that voted in referendums not to join the EU? Were they ruined? Someone is spreading a rumour that they have great prosperity and the lowest rates of unemployment in Europe.

Mr. Rammell: If the hon. Gentleman is seriously comparing Britain with a country such as Norway in terms of dependency on trade with EU countries, he needs to look at the facts. It is possible for a small nation to survive on the edge of Europe, but it would not be possible for a country such as Britain, 50 per cent. of whose exports go to the EU, to survive after withdrawal, because we would face enormous retribution from our current EU partners.

Let me conclude—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Had I taken fewer interventions, I might have finished sooner. However, let me end with the single currency, which is not on the agenda for Helsinki, but is an issue that is likely to be discussed at the summit. I support the Government's policy on the single currency, because it will be in Britain's interests to join a strong single currency. We should strive to meet the five criteria we have set and, having met them, we should put the issue to the people in a referendum.

I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams). Were we to pursue the policy he suggests, it would be manna from heaven for Conservative Members, who would accuse us of all sorts of duplicity. Regardless of turnout, if we cannot convince the British people in a referendum, we should not join the single currency. Therefore, I hope that we stick to our commitment to a referendum on a single currency.

Before that referendum is held, we have our work cut out to inform the British people and persuade them of the merits of Britain joining the single currency. In that context, I welcome the work done by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues in making the case for Britain joining a strong single currency in the right circumstances. The longer we stay out of the single currency, the higher the price we pay. Last week, *The Daily Telegraph*—not the most Europhile of newspapers—reported major inward investors in car manufacturing in this country saying that, if Britain adopted the Conservative policy and stayed out of the single currency indefinitely, they would withdraw their investment from this country, putting millions of jobs at risk. That is the real issue that we should be addressing in this debate.

The debate should focus on our identity; what future vision we have for our country within Europe and how that identity matches the real world. The world has changed fundamentally over the past 20 years, and I want a Government and a policy that will deal with the world as it is, not as we would wish it to be and not as it was 20 or 30 years ago. I am confident that this Government will begin to build upon that at the Helsinki summit.

7.1 pm

Sir Raymond Whitney (Wycombe): I agree with the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) that difficult decisions will need to be taken on enlargement, the weighting of voting and on the number of Commissioners. I part company with him rather sharply on his view of the capability of Mr. Neil Kinnock and the abilities that he may bring to the difficult task of reforming the Commission, which is much needed. I know of nothing in Mr. Kinnock's career that suggests that his experience and talents are those that are required to make sense of the Commission.

Next week's European summit at Helsinki will take place at a time when we must all accept that the people's view of the European Union is that it is tarnished and tired. Those of us who want it to work must say that

something needs to be done about it. To say that a relaunch is needed is not too strong a phrase. It is important to recognise, however, that a great deal has been achieved over the 50 years of its existence. That is something that is almost never heard in these debates. We should also recognise that there is much more to do.

In no member country is there more to do to increase acceptance and understanding of the EU than in this country. We all understand the reasons for that, which are our history, geography, perhaps our temperament, and our culture. Those factors make it quite difficult for us to accept some of the things that continental Europeans accept, given all the wars that they have endured. Their experience gives them a very different perspective of the EU. However, it is difficult to believe that, nearly 27 years after our accession, as we were told yesterday, the results of a British social attitudes survey would show that 50.3 per cent. of people want to leave the EU or reduce its powers. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) cheers. I do not share his enthusiasm for that. I lament that that is the position 27 years on, but we must recognise it. Those who are on my side in the debate would want to do something about it.

Part of the reason for 50.3 per cent. of the British people taking such a view is the media. All politicians blame the media, but many of them have much to blame the media about. In my political experience, there has been an unprecedented campaign among so much of the media, a good deal of which is owned by foreigners, who seem intent on souring Britain's relations with our European partners. We all have our own examples, and there are hundreds of them every month.

I shall not detain the House too long, but I shall give two examples. *The Sunday Telegraph* told us that the wicked European Union was going to do away with St. John Ambulance vehicles. It stated that EU regulations would force it to buy a new fleet. When tackled about it, the executive of St. John Ambulance said that it was nothing to do with any EU directive—it was just the responsible thing to do.

I shall give one more example and then move on. *The News of the World* stated that there was a "totally bonkers" proposal that the EU intended to ban the sticks used by our lollipop ladies. That had nothing to do with the EU. The Government had decided to introduce a new and coherent design, one already used in Wales and based on one agreed by a United Nations-backed convention dating from 1966.

Such examples are very funny, but they are extremely serious because they have poisoned the view of our electorate about our relationship with, and our interests in, the EU. It is us, the political classes, who must bear the main responsibility. We can have our side swipe at the media, but is we who have failed. Indeed, both parties have failed. We know that the issue transcends parties. We remember the see-sawing and zig-zagging of the Labour party. We are all too well aware of the problems and differences that we have in the Conservative party. The Foreign Secretary has quite a long record of being anti-Europe. My memory tells me that, when the Prime Minister fought a by-election in Beaconsfield, the neighbouring constituency to mine, he did so on an anti-European ticket. We all have responsibilities and difficulties. We know that there are Labour Members who share the predominant view of those of my hon. Friends who are currently in the Chamber.

Dr. Julian Lewis: In support of what my hon. Friend has said about politicians being responsible, would he accept that some politicians in the EU are themselves responsible? I have in mind that Neil Kinnock and others felt it necessary to resign as being part of a collective responsibility for corruption, and then felt able to return to office. Surely that creates a cynical view among the British electorate about what is going on.

Sir Raymond Whitney: As I said at the beginning of my remarks, I would be the first person to agree that many mistakes have been made, of which my hon. Friend has drawn attention to one. With respect, there is nothing gained in scoring points on that matter. We must move forward and get things right in future, whatever mistakes have been made in the past.

On those issues, there are fundamentally two groups. As I have said, views on them go across party. There are those who think that the EU will never work, or at least will never work for the United Kingdom. They want us to get out of it. A larger group, of which I am one, believe that we must stay in, make the EU work as best we can and get the best deal for the United Kingdom.

I believe that the first group is completely wrong and would harm the United Kingdom if its ambition of removing us from the EU were achieved. I do not wish to sound patronising, but the members of this group have a complete right to their view. I could mount a defence of their view even though I do not believe in it. I speak rather like a barrister.

I have only one request for those people who take the view that we should get out of the EU, and that is honesty. If they want us out, they should say so. Damage is being done by those who want us out but who are not prepared to say so. They criticise continuously, using the silly sort of newspaper reports to which I have referred. They demand new initiatives in the EU, which they know our partners would find completely unacceptable, because they are against the spirit of the union. They look for defeat and, having been defeated, their enthusiasm for getting out is rekindled.

Mr. Nicholls: My hon. Friend's appeal for honesty in this context is justifiable. Will he tell me honestly whether he has read the treaty of Rome? Secondly, if he has read it, will he honestly deny that it is patently a document in which a common market with a single currency are not ends in themselves but part of a project for a federal Europe? Has my hon. Friend read the treaty and will he deny that that is its content?

Sir Raymond Whitney: I have not read every word of the treaty of Rome. However, when we were debating other treaties, I referred to the treaty of Rome and worked my way through it. I have ploughed my way through most of it.

The treaty envisages an ever-closer union of peoples. It is up to us as more or less intelligent political leaders and individuals to make sense of the treaty of Rome, and not to be bamboozled by legal terminology. My hon. Friend should not denigrate what has been achieved and what

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more can be achieved. Those who want us out of Europe should be honest. We need an end to the subterfuge of those who will not declare that they want us out, but seek to make such a withdrawal inevitable.

For the second group, in which I include myself, the first task is to make sure that we state our case more clearly. The declared policy of my party is to be "In Europe, not run by Europe". I endorse that slogan. There are two elements to that proposition, and both are important.

For me, and surely for any reasonable person, to be in Europe means to approach Europe in a positive spirit—a spirit that will ensure as far as possible that the union will work—and to recognise that, in a union of 15 countries now, and more in future, working with so many partners entails compromise and sometimes pragmatism. Pragmatism is a great principle of the Conservative party.

We must make sure that people understand that there are benefits from being in Europe, and what those benefits are. If there are no benefits, let us get out and stop saying that we want to be in Europe. When more than 50 per cent. say that they want to get out, that demonstrates our failures so far and the need for us to work harder.

On the other part of the formula—"not run by Europe"—I can think of no hon. Member who would claim to want to be ruled by Europe, but too many in our party refuse to recognise and welcome the fact that, since Maastricht, things in Europe have been moving in a direction that ensures that there need be no question of being ruled by Europe.

Maastricht was a watershed, followed by Amsterdam. After that, the European Union switched from being a nascent European federation in the days of Mr. Delors, to become a treaty-based system of managing relations between sovereign states. If any of my hon. Friends are in doubt about that, I refer them to a useful article that appeared in *The Economist* on 23 October, which sets that out in interesting detail.

If we understood that, we would put away the fear and the myth of the European super-state that seems to keep some of my hon. Friends awake at night, tossing and turning in their beds. The Heads of Government have taken back from the Commission the powers that were drifting to it. We should understand the degree to which the situation has changed.

I am dismayed when I have discussions with colleagues who fail to recognise that change. They also fail to recognise that European politicians, for various understandable reasons, use different rhetoric from us. The word "federal", for example, means different things in different states—we are all familiar with that old chestnut. I know of no leading politician in Europe, whether in government or in opposition, who is aching to hand over the power to govern his country to some supranational body or other group of foreigners.

Take the euro. Let us understand that the member states of the EU are not led by idiots. They have extremely successful economies, and their Governments will not jeopardise what they have achieved over the past 50 years. They decided that, for both economic and political reasons, the single market and the single currency made sense. However, they did not hand over control to the European Commission. They handed it over to an independent central bank, because their experience, which on the whole had been successful, showed that independent central banks work.

Such a climate is relatively new—it is certainly new to some of my hon. Friends. It gives Britain a chance to achieve our objectives in Europe, and to implement the initiatives for which we are well qualified—to liberalise trade, to open up markets, and to do what our former right hon. Friend, Sir Leon Brittan, did in the Uruguay round. We have our chance in Seattle to do that again.

If Britain operates with good will, it can bring to the European Union the sort of initiatives that most of my hon. Friends would welcome. We have many more friends in Europe and potential allies in such objectives than we sometimes seem to think.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Does it perturb him that entry to the euro would entail monetary policy being run by a governing council of the central bank that comprises three Germans, two Dutchman, two Finns, two Frenchmen, two Italians, two Spaniards, a Belgian, an Irishman, a Luxemburger and a Portuguese, whom we are legally prohibited from seeking in any way to influence in their conduct of policy?

Sir Raymond Whitney: As we have not allowed ourselves to be in at the creation of the central bank, we cannot complain. My hon. Friend is a classic example of being hostile to Europe, calling for initiatives which go wrong, and exulting when they go wrong. He is smiling, and he knows that I am right.

We have heard much in the debate about defence. It has been known for a generation that western Europe has failed to keep pace with the Americans in its defence effort. I was involved a quarter of a century ago in a project called the two-way street. I tried in my modest way to help in that, but we failed for various reasons. We go on failing, and the gap between the American capability and the western Europeans' gets worse. That was highlighted in Bosnia and Kosovo, and we all know now about the differences in weapons, strategic lift and all the other aspects that my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) listed.

In Europe, we have 50 per cent. more population than the Americans, but they spend 60 per cent. more than we do on defence. According to last year's figures, the average per capita defence expenditure in the United States was $1,038; in the European Union, it was $389. The gaps in expenditure and capability must be closed. We Europeans must do more and do it better, whether through the Anglo-French initiative, the Franco-German initiative, the rapid reaction force, EDSI—the European defence and security identity—or by changing the Western European Union. We must have a capability of our own.

All of us who are dedicated Atlanticists know that we must be extremely careful about NATO, which is the most successful alliance that there has ever been, and the commitment to the Americans. They know that, we know that, the Germans know that, and I have every confidence that we have enough nous to create a relatively modest but effective European military force without upsetting NATO and the European Union. We have had that debate in the Conservative party for many years; I hope that it

will not last much longer. I hope that we will face reality and tell those who want us out of Europe to be clear, open and honest. The rest of us can then make sure that we are truly "In Europe, not run by Europe".

I end with a quotation from a former distinguished Prime Minister, who said:

"Britain does not dream of some cosy, isolated existence on the fringes of the European Community. Our destiny is Europe, as part of that Community."

Those were the words of Baroness Thatcher 11 years ago.

7.21 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Like the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor), I opposed joining the Common Market in 1975. The difference between us—apart from the fact that he was Member of Parliament for Glasgow, Cathcart and I was 11 at the time—is that he opposes the single currency on the ground of English nationalism, which is a principled position, while I oppose it for good, solid, democratic, Labour reasons, to which the Labour party clung for a long time. It has not entirely abandoned them, but it has moved away from them in the past few years. Clearly, my view brings me into conflict with many of my hon. Friends, who perceive the European Union to be a liberal and enlightened force for good in the world. I do not impugn their motives; they genuinely believe that the European Union is a force for good. However, reality does not bear that out.

The starkest example is not from within the European Union, but is provided by its record in the third world, towards which it has behaved in a way that is reminiscent of the colonial ambitions of last century. It has ridden roughshod over the third world, and treated some of the poorest countries in the world contemptuously. The Select Committee on International Development has done good work in exposing the way in which the European Union, under the Lomé convention, manoeuvres third world countries into taking on disadvantageous trading arrangements, and tries to remove barriers that have been put up by democratically elected Governments—not only in countries but between Governments—so that those countries can be more easily exploited by the big banks of Europe and multinational companies based in Europe.

European Union aid has been mismanaged and is mired in corruption. The Commission has direct control over approximately a third of Britain's aid budget to the third world—that is a third of £2 billion. For example, two or three years ago, the Commission dreamt up a scheme to help the Guarani indians in Paraguay. That was a laudable aim, but the Commission was told not to plough any of the money—which was £12 million—into Paraguay to help the indigenous indians until their land claims had been sorted out, in case the money was used for corrupt deals, bribes and seedy activities.

Last year, the Commission decided to start handing over the money as part of phase 2 of the operation. Two independent reports pointed out that hardly any land deals had been settled. One report was prepared by St. Andrew's university and the other was by Dr. John Palmer, a British anthropologist, who pointed out that only one out of the 47 land claims had been settled. Later, Jonathan Mazower of Survival International prepared a report, which found that indigenous indians continued to sleep on the streets and to live in extremely poor and deprived conditions. Nevertheless, the Commission did not care and, against the opposition of the United Kingdom Government, it ploughed the money into Paraguay. That money is now helping to finance bribery and corruption. That is only one example. Corruption is rife in the European Union's dealings with the third world.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Surely the hon. Gentleman does not condemn all the European Union's actions in the name of development. The Lomé convention has protected the banana growers of the Caribbean from having to resort to other crops, such as types of drug, to make a living. It has done much good, and it may disappear soon. Many good aid projects come from the European Union. I accept that some are inefficient and misplaced, but not all of them are in that category.

Mr. Cryer: There are probably examples of good aid projects, but the European Union and the Commission are structurally mired in corruption and mismanagement. While we are on the subject of bananas and the third world, let us consider the European Union delegation to the World Trade Organisation in Seattle. A resuscitated multilateral agreement on investment is hidden among the delegates' position papers. The WTO had originally intended to agree the MAI some time ago. It was dropped because of enormous opposition, not least popular opposition, which continues. However, the Commission has revived it, stuck it in the proposals to the WTO and taken it to Seattle. Despite the fact that it is a slightly watered down version of the original MAI, if it is adopted, multinational companies will be able to sue elected Governments for implementing the policies that they were mandated to carry out.

Against that background, economic and monetary union can be seen for what it is—a plan by a small, rich, white club of countries to institutionalise monetarism while exploiting the third world. Yet those of us who point out the deficiencies in the system are condemned as illiberal luddites, who live in the past. I have heard no real justification for the Maastricht treaty, which is a clear institutionalisation of monetarism. The right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), who signed the treaty in 1992 is now shadow Chancellor and is hardly a dyed-in-the-wool socialist. He believed at the time that the treaty made a strong case for monetarism.

I have read the Maastricht treaty. As I turned the pages, my heart sank to my boots. It is a monetarist's poisonous dream. I have never heard a sound justification for handing over enormous power to bankers who sit in Frankfurt and are removed from the people about whom they make decisions and whose lives they affect. They are unelected and unaccountable.

Monetary policy is currently more important than it has been for a long time. In the 1940s, Britain had interest rates of 2 per cent. or 3 per cent. Fiscal policy was used to keep the lid on inflation and to control the economy. That system has largely been abandoned by many western European Governments. Monetary policy has become increasingly important, and powers have been handed over to bankers headed by Mr. Wim Duisenberg.

The next stage will involve establishing a central tax-gathering mechanism. A single currency has never been established without some central tax-gathering

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mechanism. That is a step on the path to political union. If hon. Members do not believe me, let us consider the views of some of the key supporters of the single currency. Hans Eichel, the German Finance Minister, argued:

"We will now strive towards political unification . . . EMU will not be enough."

Wim Duisenberg—that loveable mop top and President of the European central bank—said:

"The process of monetary union goes hand-in-hand with political integration and ultimately political union."

In 1994, the President of the Bundesbank, Hans Tietmeyer said:

"In my opinion there is good reason to believe that, to ensure lasting success, a monetary union requires—over and above the joint central banking system—a more far-reaching political association than that defined in the Maastricht Treaty."

My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) mentioned the current Prime Minister of Spain and to answer him I refer to Felipe González, the previous Prime Minister of Spain, who I would have expected to have more in common with my hon. Friend and I politically. He said recently that

"the single currency is the greatest abandonment of sovereignty since the foundation of the European Community . . . we need this United Europe . . . we must never forget that the euro is an instrument for this project".

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Cryer: It is a bit embarrassing to hear all the cheers from the Opposition Benches. As I have said, I am not a little Englander. I oppose the single currency for good, sound, democratic Labour reasons. That is what we did in the early 1970s and we should still do so today.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I endorse the thrust of what he has said. Does he agree that it is important also, in the light of what my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney) has said, to recall the remarks made by the former Irish Prime Minister, John Bruton, who said:

"We must recognise that political unity of purpose will be vital if the euro is to work. Countries will not be able to dine à la carte at the European table any more . . . Europe needs to develop political institutions which have sufficient democratic legitimacy to demand sacrifices of Europe's peoples and to mobilise them in a common cause."

Could it be any clearer?

Mr. Cryer: The key phrase is "democratic legitimacy". The EU as it stands will never have any democratic legitimacy and the same is true of reform of the common agricultural policy—I do not see how it can be done, and the ability to carry out such reform is simply not in the current system.

Sir Raymond Whitney: My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) referred to a former Taoiseach talking about freedom of political action and monetary union. Does the hon. Gentleman not recall that, for decades, the punt and the pound were linked? That seemed to have no impact in restraining the foreign policy of the Irish Republic.

Mr. Cryer: We could have come out of such an arrangement at any time, but the single currency and EMU represent the point of no return. We could not return from EMU unless the currency collapsed; if it did, we would pay the price with massive levels of unemployment and poverty beside which the unemployment and poverty of the 1930s would begin to pale by comparison.

I respect the views of my hon. Friends and know that they are genuinely held, particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, but the reality of the record of the EU and, in particular, the Commission is completely at odds with the perception held by some of them.

I would like to put a couple of points to my hon. Friend the Minister. First, this decision is clearly the most momentous that this country will face in the next 50 years or has faced in the previous 50 and, rather than looking at the propaganda that is flying back and forth, the Government should launch a White Paper or a Green Paper—as was done in the early 1970s, when we started talking about the Common Market—that sets out the arguments objectively. Secondly, a lot of taxpayers' money is being spent on promoting the EU and the single currency. The European Commission uses a lot of money to propagate its belief in the single currency, particularly in schools across Europe. That is certainly happening in schools in this country. Are we to see taxpayers' money used to put the opposite point of view?

One of the lessons of 1975, which created great bitterness about the referendum, was that the "Yes" campaign was absolutely loaded to the gills with cash that flowed in from multinational companies and the big institutions. The "No" campaign was almost skint and was hardly able to launch itself because of lack of finances. There should be some way of making finance available—in this case, to the "No" campaign—to achieve balance. I should like my hon. Friend the Minister to reply to those two points.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Has the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) given way or concluded his speech?

Mr. Cryer: I have concluded my speech.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I call Mr. Cash.

7.35 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): We are indeed heading towards a serious and deep watershed in respect of the next intergovernmental conference and the future of the European Union. We have heard much today and on previous occasions about the euro and the implications of the single currency. As far as I am concerned, we should have vetoed the Maastricht treaty in the first place, but, having said that, European government has indeed been created. It has also been endorsed by the Government under the Amsterdam treaty, which has taken us further and deeper into European integration and more European government.

We are heading for another intergovernmental conference and on its agenda are extensions of qualified majority voting in the arena of European government. I intervened on the Foreign Secretary on that very point

because one simply cannot talk about qualified majority voting without having regard to the functions to which it is being applied. I made a similar point to the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), when he appeared before the European Scrutiny Committee a couple of weeks ago. He gave me no satisfactory answer because there is not one.

We are being taken further and deeper into that process, so I have to disagree profoundly with my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney). He seems to believe that, somehow or other, the idea that we are being taken into European government—or, to use another expression, a European super-state or one country divided into provinces—is an illusion. I strongly urge him to read all the quotations that have been mentioned throughout the debate and many others besides. He should perhaps even read the *Official Journal* of the European Community, where he will find many quotations that he could read to his satisfaction.

Sir Raymond Whitney: Rather than reading quotations, taken in or out of context, why does not my hon. Friend look at what is happening on the ground? Does he not see that the Heads of Government have taken back from the Commission the sort of powers that cause him understandable concern?

Mr. Cash: The short answer is that if my hon. Friend looks at the treaties, he will see that functions have been continuously moving in the direction of more centralisation and more European government. That is what the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties were all about and that is why I took such a vigorous part in tabling 240 amendments in respect of the Maastricht treaty.

Dr. Julian Lewis: At the risk of adding another quotation to those already deployed, what does my hon. Friend make of the remarks of Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, who was quoted in *The Times* of 27 October? He referred to the European Commission as the "European government". Asked to justify that term, he said:

> "But what is the Commission? We are here to take binding decisions as an executive power. If you don't like the term government for this, what other term do you suggest? . . . I speak of a European government because we take government decisions."

Mr. Cash: Absolutely. I am delighted to be reminded of that quotation by my hon. Friend because that is exactly what such people say. Only in this country is there the ridiculous charade that these developments are not all about political union. Are we to be regarded as crazy because we know that what is going on in the rest of the continent is being recorded—day in, day out—in every newspaper? Only in this country is there a ridiculous attempt to try to cover it all up with camouflage or smoke and mirrors.

On the question whether we should co-operate with the nations of Europe, of course we should; it is absolutely crazy to imagine that we would not want to co-operate with other countries. However, the issue is not co-operation, but the legal framework and the co-ordination resulting from the creation of European government. The European Court of Justice enforces the legal decisions that are being taken. On the question of the recent *Financial Times* survey, is it not interesting that this, of all newspapers, refers to 50.3 per cent. of people saying that they want to get out of or reduce the powers of the EU?

The crucial point is the second one. Three times this year, we—I—have been accused by the Prime Minister of never having wanted Britain to join the European Union in the first place, and of wanting to leave it. When I tried to challenge him on the day in question, he refused to accept my intervention. I subsequently received a letter from his private secretary, which said nothing at all.

The fact is that an attempt is being made—and the Government have been building it up—to smear the Conservative party by attributing to it a policy of withdrawal. I should be delighted to engage in a full-blown debate with the Minister of State and the Foreign Secretary, not to mention the Prime Minister, about the veracity of their allegations. It is a monstrous slur; it is not justified. Some of us argue for renegotiation of both the Maastricht and the Amsterdam treaties. I certainly do, because I think that otherwise it will be all words—all smoke and mirrors. I do not believe that we can solve the problems that face the European Union unless we have renegotiation on those terms.

The Government, however, are getting away with the allegation that renegotiation means withdrawal. It is up to us to repudiate that, and I state emphatically—certainly on my behalf and, I believe, on behalf of many colleagues—that those of us who want to sort out the problems of the European Union do not accompany our desire with a demand for withdrawal. I want to put that firmly and clearly on the record.

I think that it may help some of my colleagues to reconsider the question of their refusal to renegotiate the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties, because the two issues are complementary. I am not thinking only about the questions of the euro and tax harmonisation, which we heard today—and I entirely agree—would lead to increasing harmonisation through corporate taxes and, eventually, income tax. There is a simple reason for my view. All those functions have been created, and a good many more will be created in a few months time, but the question will then arise of how to fill the gap between the creation of some functions and that of others—we are talking of rights, duties and responsibilities—with a federal budget of only 2.5 per cent.

The answer is that it will be done, but that it will be necessary to impose a tax to pay for defence, foreign policy and all the other matters that will be involved in the next treaty, but which have their origin in the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): The hon. Gentleman talks of renegotiation, taxation and the Maastricht treaty. Would he renegotiate the single market?

Mr. Cash: I personally would not, although I see good reasons for altering the basis on which some of the provisions of the single market operate, and I think that mistakes were made in the creation of the regime. I voted for the Single European Act because I believed, as I believe now, that if we could get it right we could secure tremendous gain for all European countries, in terms of prosperity and so forth, by reducing the logjam of

[Mr. Cash]

restrictions on trade and making Europe competitive. I have never had a problem with the Single European Act in principle, but the same does not apply to the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties.

I believe that, especially as we move from Amsterdam to the next treaty, foreign policy and defence policy are on a par with the question of the single currency. We need to get that into the open. The idea that the whole issue is just about the single currency is a massive delusion. I am totally against the single currency: I would say "never", I have said "never", and I will continue to say "never". I say that, however, because the adoption of a single currency would subvert the House of Commons and our democracy.

I shall not argue the case in depth because there is no time for me to do so, but the adoption of a single currency will completely undermine the democratic decision making of the House of Commons, which depends on the ability of voters to go to polling booths and exercise free choice. It depends on the subsequent general election and the convening of Members here as a free Parliament. The decisions of those voters in those polling booths will effectively be taken away if we have a single currency and a central bank: in that event, decisions will be made by people who are both unaccountable and independent. I am against the single currency for that reason.

On the question of foreign policy, we are moving into dangerous territory. I was interested to hear the Foreign Secretary refuse to rule out the idea of qualified majority voting on that. I strongly recommend those who read this speech in *Hansard* to refer to an excellent pamphlet produced by Sir John Coles, entitled "British Influence and the Euro". Until 1997, Sir John was head of the British diplomatic service and permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office. Given the authoritative weight that it carries, the pamphlet is compulsory reading. It is absolutely brilliant.

The pamphlet deals with, for example, the question of foreign policy. Referring to Maastricht and Amsterdam, Sir John says:

"That is what the CFSP"—

the common foreign and security policy—

"has come to. For the time being, it falls short of a single European foreign policy but only just."

Sir John then demonstrates the way in which the policy will develop, commenting:

"If the centralising tendencies of the EU continue unchecked"—

by renegotiation—

"in the coming years and indeed if the CFSP moves any closer to a single European foreign policy, then the independent British voice will be increasingly muffled, with consequences for our influence in the rest of the world".

Sir John proceeds to develop his argument further. He issues another warning in regard to defence policy:

"Should that ability"—

our ability to have our own highly professional and well-equipped armed forces—

"ever become limited by the creation of European armed forces, subsuming national forces and subject to central EU direction, then British influence overseas would be sharply reduced."

I was interested to note that the Foreign Secretary did not refer to the Franco-German meeting on defence and security in Paris yesterday. Contrary to all the assertions we have heard today that there would somehow be adequate protection for the existing arrangements in the Western European Union and NATO, and that we were all members of an harmonious club, Sir John said:

"France and Germany are waiting from the European Council of Helsinki for substantial advances on agreement of European policy for defence and security and are in favour . . . of decisive progress for the development of military capabilities of the European Union and of decisions to put in place a decision making body as a military instrument at the heart of the European Union. These elements are indispensable to give the EU the autonomous capability to make decisions, and . . . to launch and carry out military operations",

with a nod in the direction of the alliance.

France and Germany

"propose to create strategic mobility, in stages and within the appropriate multinational frame, and a European command of aerial transport"—

European Union transport planes, and so forth. The fact is that we are now witnessing the undermining of NATO on a substantial scale. Those who argue the opposite must answer my allegations.

Sir John says:

"The more centralised the EU becomes, the less distinctive will be the policies and activities of the individual member states. There can be little doubt that the single currency is the most important act of political centralisation in the EU's history . . . We are on the way to a single economic government of Europe. And since government is largely about economic policy, the ultimate prospect, unless the process is checked, is one of little power being left in national capitals."

Those are the statements of a man who, until recently, was head of the diplomatic service; he retired only in 1997. By going down the route of qualified majority voting, we will increasingly be ensnared in European government.

Another issue came up when the European Scrutiny Committee went to Finland recently—the charter of fundamental rights. I should like to hear from the Minister of State that we will definitely, without any shadow of a doubt, veto any attempt to put such a charter under the aegis of the European Court of Justice. In the Select Committee, he said that it would be a showcase of rights—a political statement. Yesterday, the appointment of Lord Goldsmith as a member of the drafting committee was announced, but the language was imprecise. There are suggestions that it should not be a legal text. I want to hear from the Minister that it will not be a legal text.

Mr. Vaz: I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I have told him before, and will tell him again, that the charter is to act as a presentation point of the rights and responsibilities that citizens of Europe have received under treaties. It will not be legally enforceable or binding. Lord Goldsmith will be an excellent person to serve on the drafting committee.

Mr. Cash: I hear what the Minister says, but there is much determination among other member states to take us in another direction.

On the question of the Prime Minister and my call for a constitutional White Paper, it is inconceivable that the British people should not be informed of the rights that they enjoy at present under our constitution and to have those explained in terms of the developments in the EU—not just the single currency, but matters such as justice and home affairs and the whole business of the new

judicial area. The Prime Minister cannot be allowed to get away with it. An early-day motion in my name has well over 100 signatures. I strongly urge other hon. Members to sign it. It is inconceivable that the British people should not be given a proper White Paper. In his evidence the other day, the Minister of State said that there would be a White Paper, but that it would not deal with the questions that I have raised with the Prime Minister. I should like the Minister to explain why not.

Mr. Bercow: If the Prime Minister is so strenuously opposed, as he claims, to the vision of single European government, why on earth did he so enthusiastically back for the presidency of the European Commission a fanatical federaste who supports that vision?

Mr. Cash: For the simple reason that it encourages, all the way down the line, further and further integration. The more those people have their place men, the more certain it is that they will take us deeper and deeper into European government. That is the clear intention.

I regret to say that I do not have much confidence in the idea of flexibility. Some years ago, I secured an Adjournment debate about the European Commission's view on flexibility, but I have considerable reservations about applying the restrictions to new areas of legislation and, indeed, to unspecified core areas.

Having said that, I believe that today's Conservative party is very much on-message. I am concerned that renegotiation should be part of the package. To renegotiate Maastricht and Amsterdam is a fundamental prerequisite to getting ourselves and Europe out of the mess that Europe is in now. The direction in which the Conservative party is going is the right direction. On some counts, 75 per cent. of the British people are against the single currency. The party has to get itself up in the opinion polls from 29 per cent. to at least 70 per cent. We will win the general election by getting our priorities right.

7.55 pm

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): I should like to concentrate on the European security and defence identity aspect of the Helsinki conference.

As has been mentioned, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) is waging a campaign on that front, starting with his infamous appearance in the United States Congress and continuing in *The House Magazine*. The essential theme is, "But what will the Americans think about it?" It goes along the lines that, if Europe shows that it can operate alone, the American attachment to NATO will be weakened. It is almost like saying that we should stand around in Europe looking helpless, and charitable America will come along and underwrite European defence policy. The message from my own side and many other sides is that such a policy is both a forlorn hope, in that the Americans would never tolerate it, and undesirable from the point of view of our foreign policy interest.

American foreign policy interests are not congruent with those of Europe. There is a substantial area of common ground, but it is not an exact parallel. Therefore, although NATO should and will be preserved, and is the keystone of our defence policy for common areas of interest, we need a dimension that enables us independently to tackle other interests that are not in that sphere.

Even within NATO, Europe needs to ensure a contribution that is much more in line with its growing economic strength. At present, European gross domestic product totals $8,346 billion, which is almost the same as the United States GDP of $8,231 billion. There are no economic grounds why we should take an inferior place in such defence matters. At present, despite that position, the defence capability of the European nations of NATO is nowhere near a match for that of the United States.

While such an imbalance exists and Europe remains dependent on United States defence capability, our ability to conduct foreign policy will suffer—it will be circumscribed—and there will be political pressure from the United States, which will complain that Europe does not shoulder enough of its own defence burden. That alone will weaken the alliance; some of the murmurings in the United States Congress have already made that plain.

That will weaken the NATO alliance far more than any indications of a separate capability for Europe to operate on its own. After all, why should young men and women from Kansas and California be involved in Bosnia and Kosovo, on the doorstep of the European Union, if young men and women from London, Lille and Ludwigshafen are not? Today, the answer to that question is ignominious for Europe.

American troops have to be involved because, without them, European forces lack the necessary range of capability and so cannot mount a substantial operation on their own. It is not because of a manifest lack of resources. Last year, European defence budgets totalled $200 billion and the American defence budget $250 billion, according to the House of Commons Library. Europe spent 80 per cent. of the United States defence budget on defence, but its capacity is nowhere near that of the United States.

European countries were recently unable to mount an operation of 50,000 to 60,000 personnel in the Balkans without American help. What an indictment—and what complacency from the Conservatives, who are objecting to the first step now being contemplated in the European Union to remedy such a glaring inadequacy.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Surely the hon. Gentleman understands that what worries us is not an improvement in Europe's defence capability, but the fact that it is proposed to be outside the structure of NATO. If it were being done inside the structure of NATO, it would add to our combined strength with the Americans, but the proposals will undermine the whole structure.

Mr. Beard: The capability is required for times when Europe's foreign policy diverges from America's or is outside its realm of interest. If the capability were within NATO, it would be under the American command and control system and the other NATO controls. That is why it needs to be outside. The European Union provides an eminently suitable vehicle for such a capability.

The proposal is for a self-contained, multi-national European force of 50,000 or 60,000, drawn from within NATO earmarked forces. That would be a valid way of starting to address the problems, while respecting the argument that it should not be a lever that separates us from NATO or weakens NATO in any way. Had such a

[Mr. Beard]

force existed, it could have made a vast difference to Balkan diplomacy when Milosevic began his expansionist probes in the early 1990s. We are now addressing the defence issues that are most likely to confront European nations, as the strategic defence review pointed out.

We also need to review all areas of European defence capabilities, with a view to plugging the gaps and realising the full potential of the present force. Heavy lift transport aircraft are but one example. We do not need to waste time and political energy on grandiose concepts such as a European army. We are embarking on a pragmatic, step-by-step approach to ensure complementarity and value for money in Europe's defence forces. If each step is justified, NATO will gain and Europe will be able to exercise an independent foreign policy.

That is the more mechanistic aspect of a European defence and security policy. The other aspect is mainly diplomatic and economic and relates to Russia—a country that has seen an immense 30 per cent. drop in its standard of living in recent years. To put that in perspective, the recessions that cause us great anxiety over here account for barely a 3 per cent. drop in GDP. The dissolution of social, civic and economic institutions has followed. Russia is an area on which European and American foreign policy might diverge.

I have read the headlines on all the current European initiatives to aid Russia. They are all worthy. Hardly a sphere of human endeavour is left untouched. However, it is not clear what is happening or what effect the initiatives have had. We need a focus, to have a discernible impact on what is happening in Russia. It is time to explore with the Russian Government the scope for a major European Union initiative to transfer technological and managerial skills, improve public administration, particularly tax collection, and establish a programme for regenerating derelict infrastructure. Letting the situation deteriorate further by turning the other way is inhuman and dangerous.

As the wealth gap widens, there will be increasing pressure for migration to western Europe, which will fertilise the ground for political extremism and move the prospect of addressing strategic arms reduction further into the future. Those issues cannot be left to the International Monetary Fund, any more than Kosovo can be left to the Red Cross.

Europe is still a hotbed of big issues, as it has been for much of this century. The saving grace now compared with Europe in the middle of the century and before the second world war is that then it had no institutions to address such problems; but now, in the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the new millennium, it can use or develop institutions to address the problems. That is the course that the European Union has embarked on with its defence initiative. I am pleased that the Government whom I support are in the lead on those issues.

8.6 pm

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): Like the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), I thank the Foreign Secretary for the helpful paper that he provided to the Foreign Affairs Committee when we met yesterday afternoon to discuss the Helsinki summit.

We should look at what has happened throughout the current presidency, not just the final summit. In the first two months after Finland took over, the European Commission existed only in a caretaker capacity because of the great row about corruption. It introduced very few initiatives at that time, but the European Union did not fall apart as a result. I have never regarded the European Union as a bicycle that will fall over if we do not keep pedalling. The Commission does not always have to be in overdrive. It was in neutral during the first two months of the Finnish presidency and Europe did not suffer at all.

There have been three very good moves while Finland has held the presidency. I welcome the press release of 29 November on economic and social matters, which said that there should be a reduction in work taxation. Another positive statement was made on the same day at the Labour and Social Affairs Council, stressing the fact that

"social protection remains a part of each member state's own decision making."

It was encouraging to have subsidiarity confirmed in that aspect of policy.

However, the most important Finnish initiative was the Foreign Ministers conference in Helsinki on 12 November to discuss the promotion of security and sustainable development in northern Europe. I particularly welcome the fact that the Russian Federation was invited, and participated. In their post-1945 relations with the Soviet Union, which was often in a sullen mood, the Finns gave a dazzling display of how to walk on a tightrope above eggshells scattered on a minefield. It is 60 years since Mr. Churchill described Russia as

"a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

He suggested that the key to that enigma was Russian national interest. It is in the Russian national interest to have good relations with the European Union and it is certainly in the European Union's interest—that includes ours—to have good relations with Russia.

We should build on the new Finnish initiative in three ways. First, we must not disengage from Russia and pass by on the other side. Global and European stability is at stake. The nightmare scenario is that Russia might lurch backwards and think that the way out of its problems is to take lots of doses of more Marxist nonsense. Secondly, ordinary Russians must be encouraged to feel that they have a stake in the prosperity and future of their country. That comes only with a genuine free market, which must be underpinned by an intelligible tax system and a legal system which is seen to be acceptable and fair.

Thirdly, Russia needs private investment and European management skills. However, the investment needs to be tightly focused on specific projects, with every effort being made to avoid the clumsy, expensive and over-mighty bureaucracy from which Russia suffers so much and which holds back economic developments and opportunities for the Russian people.

I mentioned that the Foreign Secretary had provided a helpful paper for us yesterday, and this paper was mentioned in public. The Government say that the accession negotiations with Turkey

"could not begin until Turkey met the Copenhagen political criteria."

In other words, Turkey must improve its record on human rights.

Also, what will happen about northern Cyprus? I know talks at the UN are starting on Friday between both parts of Cyprus to try to resolve the problem. However,

what happens if Turkey says it has improved its human rights record and the EU accepts that? What happens if Turkey says that it nevertheless wishes to stay in northern Cyprus? What happens if there is a plebiscite in northern Cyprus—recognised by the EU as fair and reasonable—and the people of northern Cyprus say that they wish there to be a continuing Turkish military presence on the island? That has to be resolved.

The Government—as the Conservative party did in government—have not said that there cannot be accession negotiations with Cyprus because it is divided. We have said that the fact that it is divided must not be a ban to Cyprus becoming a member of the European Union. The Government need to think about what the reaction of people in northern Cyprus will be if Turkey gets into a position where it is an accredited candidate for membership of the EU.

In the paper on defence, the Government said:

"Our main aim is to set a challenging performance goal for European military capabilities: by 2003, Europeans to be able to deploy more effective forces for crisis management, either as part of a NATO operation or as an EU-led operation."

I take it from that that any EU-led operation would be within the European theatre. Presumably there would be no question of any military action or operation east of Cyprus.

As the Government build up the European military capability, they must monitor constantly the attitude of the United States. They must assure the people of this country that, by making this change, there is no weakening whatever of the commitment of the United States to the defence of Europe and of this country. The Government must reassure people, and there are many ways in which they can do that.

When we become the Government in 2001, we will have to look at this matter, but I can tell the Government that one of the cornerstones of the defence of these islands has been the Anglo-American alliance, so well forged by Mr. Churchill and Mr. Roosevelt in 1941.

We cannot get away from the fact that our current relations with our EU partners are not in an easy state. There is no need to dash around from think tanks to focus groups or interdepartmental Government working groups to find out why that is the case. The answer is that the nature of current events—particularly in finance and agriculture—means that our interests and those of our European partners do not coincide at present.

The positive advantages of our membership of the European Union remain well above the disadvantages of our being outside. There is an unanswerable case for our staying part of the EU—there are many economic and industrial benefits. There are also opportunities for British diplomacy in Europe. I ask the Government not to be over-ambitious. The problems that we have had in Europe over the years have been because the Commission and some countries have been over-ambitious. When people get over-ambitious, disappointment and setbacks follow.

Of all the politics on this planet, European politics is simply the art of the possible. It is difficult and challenging, and we must keep at it in this country in our national interest.

8.16 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I speak as someone committed to the European ideal. I see nothing wrong at all in arguing that there is a political dimension to Europe, as well as an economic one. I see nothing wrong at all either in arguing the case for a federal Europe—although I realise that I would be very much at odds with most Opposition Members in that. It was for that reason that I was a yes voter in the 1975 referendum, and that is why I want to see the European institutions grow and develop democratically, and to have those powers that are appropriate to their function.

As we approach the Helsinki summit, I wish to address some relevant points. The EU has become, and is becoming, increasingly important for Wales and for other parts of these islands. It is certainly an important dimension for those of us serving in the National Assembly. Policies are increasingly determined at a European level, and changes in the structure and the nature of the EU will affect those policies.

The expansion to the east inevitably has a direct bearing on matters such as agricultural policy within these islands. Brussels, more than London, now decides on that policy. We found that out the hard way in October when our calf scheme was blocked by Brussels at the eleventh hour. That taught us a salutary lesson about getting a stronger voice for Wales in Brussels. Clearly, the current arrangements were totally inadequate as a means of ensuring that a scheme proposed perfectly legitimately by the National Assembly could make progress. Our National Assembly will be seeking ways of strengthening our links through UKrep and Wales's European centre to make sure that that sort of mistake does not happen again. The failure of the UK channels within the European Union to look after our interests in Wales on the calf scheme has become a driving force for Wales to develop direct links with the EU.

We are also aware of the massive importance of European Union structural funds to the economy in Wales. Those, too, will inevitably be affected by the expansion of the EU, and properly so. Wales will secure £1.7 billion from EU structural funds over the next seven years. Our challenge is to ensure that London gives as much priority to our objective 1 areas as Brussels gives. The key questions of additionality and match funding have yet to be resolved and need to be soon, so that we can obtain full advantage from the schemes.

At Helsinki, there will be discussions of forthcoming financial and taxation arrangements. No doubt the question of the UK Fontainebleau rebate lurks in the background of those discussions, and was recently debated in the European Parliament. The present arrangements have an unfortunate side-effect which was not fully foreseen at the time of the Fontainebleau agreement. As the current formula works, for every additional £100 million that the UK gets from the EU—for example, through objective 1 money—the Treasury loses about £70 million through the loss of the rebate. The net benefit, then, is only £30 million. Because of the additionality rules and the match funding that is required for some structural funds, the Treasury may have to find an additional £100 million. The UK then gains £30 million net but the Treasury is £70 million out of pocket.

That is a direct disincentive for the Treasury to maximise the take-up of EU funds and colours its attitude to some available sources of European money. Agriculture and regional policy have suffered from that. The Secretary of State conceded the point in the Welsh Grand Committee on 5 May 1998.

[Mr. Dafydd Wigley]

I hope that the UK can maximise its take-up of European Union funds to the point where they are greater than the Fontainebleau rebate, and that the Fontainebleau formula can then be phased out. Until that happens, the mechanisms are contrary to the interests not only of Wales but of any other part of the UK that may benefit directly from EU funding.

Enlargement is another issue looming above Helsinki. Plaid Cymru welcomes the extension of the European Union to take in eastern European countries, but that is bound to have implications for the way in which small nations and historic regions are represented in the European structures, as was recently flagged up by our leader in the European Parliament, Jill Evans.

The Commission told Jill Evans that paragraph 2 of article 190 of the treaty says that the composition of the European Parliament will have to be modified to

"ensure appropriate representation of the peoples of the states brought together in the Community."

It is worth dwelling on that wording. I stress the words "appropriate" and "of the peoples" and ask how the Government foresee the provisions affecting not only the level of UK representation in the European Parliament but the representation in the new structures of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as peoples of Europe.

The enlargement strategy is a main agenda item at Helsinki. The Commission recommends the opening next year of bilateral accession negotiations with all the candidate countries that comply with the political criteria as established at the Copenhagen summit in 1993. If questions arise concerning, for example, the accession of Turkey, what assurance can we have that the UK will insist that the criteria on human rights and respect for minorities must be met before Turkey's accession can be countenanced? Until it treats the Kurds properly, there is no room for Turkey in the European Union.

I urge the Government to be sensitive to the economic and social challenges that will face eastern European states that have only recently emerged from long periods of limited sovereignty. There is a real danger of free-for-all market access undermining their fledgling free economies. We need a sustainable integration policy that takes account of economic, environmental and social challenges in those countries.

We in the more affluent west must accept that a larger proportion of European structural funds post 2006 will have to go to the new member states. If we want the political benefits of a wider united Europe, there is a price that we will have to be willing to pay. We may need a greater European tier of finance, even involving direct taxation—carbon tax, for example, is relevant in this context—to help to finance the cost of helping the new member states.

Asylum and immigration policy, minority language provision and the avoidance of ethnic tensions will clearly have to be discussed at Helsinki. We need a transparency of negotiations so that the new member states and their people, as well as the existing states, fully understand the implications of those eastern European states' membership.

I am especially concerned about the effect of expansion on agriculture, both for the new member states and for the existing EU countries. We need to have more exchange projects to help to develop an understanding on the matter.

The safety of nuclear reactors in the candidate states is a key issue.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): That is right.

Mr. Wigley: I am glad that my hon. Friend agrees.

We still live in Wales with the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster 13 years ago, with continuing limitations on the movement of sheep on our farms. If that is difficult for us, how much more difficult it must be for the people in the areas immediately proximate to the disaster: not only Ukraine but parts of eastern Europe nearby. Decisions on the closure dates of Soviet-designed reactors and on the development of alternative energy sources must be a central part of the accession negotiations.

Those issues touch on the basic question of the economic viability of constituent countries of the EU. We must put even greater emphasis on policies of full employment in both existing and potential member states. Such a strategy must include positive policies to encourage entrepreneurship and new business start-ups. The move in Wales towards establishing a development bank, which we heard more about in the National Assembly this afternoon, aided by the structural funds, shows the positive way in which the European Union can help.

I am concerned about the rigidly stratified way in which the two groups of applicants are being considered as the first wave and the second wave. There is a danger of excessive stratification. Some countries are moving more quickly than others within each group. Would not it be more sensible, as the Commission recommended on 13 October, to have a fully flexible, multi-speed accession process, based exclusively on merit?

Enlargement has direct consequences for the internal structure of the European institutions, which must adopt more rigorously the principle of subsidiarity so that decisions are taken at appropriate levels. There must be a review of the division of competencies. We must strengthen the role of the Committee of the Regions, as Eurig Wyn urged in the European Parliament recently.

Helsinki must resolve the vexed question of the re-weighting of qualified majority voting in the EU, as the Foreign Secretary said. I listened to him with care, but I am still far from clear about the Government's objectives regarding qualified majority voting. It may be that we do not want to show a full hand now in the negotiations, but I would be grateful to hear the Minister's comments when he winds up.

My final point concerns the move to a common security strategy. There are good reasons for that move—for example, what happened in the Balkans—but I have listened to both sides of the argument. Certainly we would have grave reservations if the European Union were to become a nuclear power in its own right, because we feel that that could be a destabilising factor. Side by side with a common security policy must go greater efforts to develop non-military crisis management, and policies should be underpinned by a proactive role in conflict prevention.

As this century closes, it is as well for us to recall that it was marred by two bloody world wars that broke out here in Europe. The vision of the founding fathers of the

European Union was to create structures that would prevent such tragedies from ever happening again. As the Governments meet in Helsinki, we can only hope that that basic vision still drives us forward to achieve greater unity in an ever widening European Union.

8.29 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): I have always regarded this debate as the most important of the year, even though it does not deal with the great issues about which our constituents write to us, such as the national health service or law and order. It is not about the decisions, but about where those decisions are made. I cannot think of a more important debate than the question whether we continue to make decisions in this House or watch our ability to make those decisions pass to another place.

As I listened to the speeches tonight, I wondered what some of our European friends would make of this debate if they had heard it. They would have concluded that they were listening to a description of a European Union that does not exist. The impression given of the state of the European Union by the Government, and Labour Members who supported the Government's approach, is not held in Europe. It is a view of Europe that does not exist in reality and is now heard of only from Ministers and a small number of Conservative Members. It is as if those people think that we are still dealing with a common market with some extra twirly bits and some knobs on. I travel frequently in Europe, and I used to do so as a Minister, and it is unreal to suggest that that vision of Europe is shared by our European partners.

I give due credit to my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney) for arguing the case for the Europe that I have just described. I hope that he will not take it amiss if I describe him as a semi-grandee, but one might have hoped that the mega-grandees would have come to argue the case in favour of the European Union of their vision. If my hon. Friend had not argued the case, it would have gone by default.

I was troubled when my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe said that he was not sure whether he had read the treaty of Rome. I have some sympathy with that, because I did not read the treaty of Rome until about 1988. At that time, I had to go to Europe suddenly because a ministerial colleague was taken ill, and I had to make an unexceptional speech in an unacceptable place. The experience was nicely done—the car was waiting downstairs to whisk me off to the plane, for example. When I opened my red box, it contained a copy of the treaty of Rome, so I read it. It does not take that long, because it is an easier read than the Maastricht treaty. However, it is also a horrifying read, because it makes one realise that the prospectus that was put to this country in the early 1970s was wrong.

I was a political activist at the time, and I accepted what I was told by my party. It was claimed that we were entering a common market. Yes, there were one or two strange people at the margins who wanted to go further, but we were told that that would not happen. I accepted that, but I was wrong to do so. The truth about the nature of the European Union is now obscured by the great Labour lie, but it was a great Conservative lie first. Conservatives, therefore, should discuss the subject with a fair amount of humility. It was the failure of the Conservative Government of the 1970s honestly to tell the people of this country what was at stake that bedevils our relationship with Europe to this day.

I did not see the light for many years after I should have done, because it was there to see for those who were prepared to do so. I can do no better than to cite the example of a letter sent by the then Lord Chancellor on 14 December 1960 to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). It said:

"My dear Ted . . . You wrote to me on the 30th November about the constitutional implications of our becoming a party to the Treaty of Rome . . . I must emphasise that in my view the surrenders of sovereignty involved are serious ones . . . these objections ought to be brought out into the open".

Indeed they should have been. It continued:

"To confer a sovereign state's treaty-making powers on an international organisation is the first step on the road which leads by way of a confederation to the fully federal state."

That was the warning from the Government's chief Law Officer 10 years before we were finally taken into what was to become the European Union.

A number of sensible, principled Europeans have been quoted today who believe in a destiny for their countries that I passionately reject for my own. Those quotations make the prospectus abundantly clear. I shall not quote again the remarks of Hans Tietmeyer in that regard, but hon. Members must not think that he was a Johnny-come-lately who perverted the great ideal that Europe should be no more than a common market. As far back as 1963, Bundesbank president Karl Blessing said:

"The final goal of the Commission is a European Monetary Union . . . A common currency . . . is feasible only if, apart from a common trade policy, there is also a common finance and budgetary policy, a common social and wage policy—a common policy all round. In brief, this would only happen if there was a federal state."

Those aspirations have not been forgotten today. Early last month, former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl spoke at the celebrations to mark the fall of the Berlin wall. According to *The Daily Telegraph*—and the House will appreciate that the sentiments are his and not mine—he urged

"the current German Government to continue his policy of European integration or there would be 'no peaceful future for Germany and Europe.'

Mr. Kohl told the audience at the Reichstag that 'the gift of unification obliges us . . . to drive forward the building of the European house with powerful steps'."

Perhaps it sounds menacing in German, but he was building on remarks he had made previously. As long ago as 1996—in Belgium, of all countries—the former Chancellor said:

"The policy of European integration is in reality a question of war and peace in the 21st century."

He added that the only alternative to closer integration would be war on the continent.

People who have been prepared to read the source documents and to listen to what European statesmen have been saying have always known that that was the agenda. It was not the agenda that the Conservative Government of the day put to this country on a false prospectus, and it is not the agenda that the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), will put to the House when he winds up the debate.

The reality facing the House and the country at large is not some fantasy Europe that we think might rather suit us, but the Europe that is in fact on offer. Although I

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commend the courage of my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe, it is not good enough to say that we should not get too exercised by the words that have been used. People used those words to frame their vision of the European destiny that they desperately wanted. That destiny might have been right for us as well if our history had been like theirs, but our history is different. It would have been more honest to tell the Europeans, "We wish you well, but the destiny that you see for yourselves is not a destiny for us."

I can do no better than to quote my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)—not someone who could ever be derided as a snarling Euro-sceptic. On 1 March 1995, he said:

"The often unspoken fear of many people—we should address it honestly and clearly and examine it—is that Europe might develop into a super-state, an overarching Government with no national veto, no control over our own borders, prescriptive decisions, a single currency imposed and the nation state retreating to a wholly subordinate role. That fear exists out there . . . and we should recognise the fact that it exists . . . I for one would find such a Europe wholly unacceptable for this country. I do not believe that it is remotely likely, but, if that were to be the future, it would not be a future that would be suitable for this country."—[*Official Report*, 1 March 1995; Vol. 255, c. 1062.]

The treaty of Rome foretold the creation of a super-state. There is no other way in which it can be interpreted. I do not know where my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe has been since 1998, because we are now on the verge of the creation of that state. We are almost there. That state now has its own anthem, flag, Parliament, civil service and passport. It has common citizenship and its own embassies. It has its own policies for defence and taxation—and it has its own currency as well. We do ourselves no credit, and betray our country, if we do not realise that that is what we have created. When my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe says that he knows no one on the continent readily prepared to surrender their powers, in that regard at least, my contacts seem to be more extensive than his.

When I was in Government, I well remember talking to a former Italian Prime Minister. I asked, "Why do you want to give away your power to a new state?" He said, "Are you serious? I would love to go into the Italian Parliament and say that I cannot possibly deal with this. It will have to be dealt with by the European Union." He may have been expressing things in his own way but his point was that from his perspective, the European state that they wanted to create was decent and right. It is right for them but it is not right for us.

What are we going to do about that? I am with my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), who mentioned the easy jibe about how we just want to withdraw from Europe. In some ways, it is sad. I get criticised by Christopher Booker for not really wanting to come out of Europe but when other people look at what I say, they say that I do.

We cannot go on this way. It is in the interests of this country and of the European Union that we should have a relationship with which we all feel comfortable. Only a fool, a self-deluding person or the Foreign Secretary could honestly look at the state of our relationship with Europe today and say that we can feel comfortable with it. That is a self-evident absurdity. People such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine)—it is usually hon. Members on this side of the House—say, "It is no good talking about doing anything about this. It is over. You cannot possibly do anything. Our partners will never let us get away it."

When I hear such rhetoric, I think what a dismal view it is to have of our European partners. I do not believe that they want to hold us in thrall in a relationship that we do not enjoy. They are entitled to a Government and a political party that will honestly say that we came in under false pretences, that it is our fault and that we want to achieve a relationship with which we can feel comfortable. If we approached our partners with such humility and honesty, we could achieve such a relationship with Europe.

It is not a question of withdrawing from Europe because we cannot. It is there; it is our principal trading partner and our common heritage. Twice in a lifetime, a million war dead have testified to the fact that Europe is part of our destiny. If we faced up to what we did by not admitting that their destiny and future were different from ours, think of what could have been achieved.

Could we withdraw from the European Union? Of course we could. It is an illusion and wrong in law to pretend that we could not. If we do not say, "Do what we want or we'll leave", but that we want to achieve something that could be common to us both, then provided that we are prepared to admit that we have not, as a sovereign Parliament lost our ability withdraw—we have not quite yet—I believe that much could be achieved.

Mr. Beard: When the hon. Gentleman puts to members of the European Union the proposition that he wants to renegotiate the treaty of Rome, what would he do when they lack all interest in it and say that they will not renegotiate?

Mr. Nicholls: The hon. Gentleman tempts me, but I will not be drawn down that path. He has a jaundiced idea of our partners. From having done the job, I know that, at the moment, we go into Europe, berate them and say that they have changed the rules. [HON. MEMBERS: "You did."] Hear me out. The Government say that they will be at the heart of Europe and achieve everything but in the end they stand alone foolishly. The Labour Government have nothing to teach us in respect of saying that they want to do it their way and getting egg on their face. The fact of it is that we have gone into Europe and told the other countries that they have changed the rules. They have never changed the rules. We are the ones who, in wilful ignorance, went in with a different perspective. We have never tried honestly to admit that to the Europeans.

Is the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard) seriously saying that the Europeans would not turn round and say, "You have been straight about this. We now understand where you are coming from. You admit that it cannot go on like this. We know that our relationship does not work. We know that it causes ill temper. We know that every British Prime Minister, whether Labour or Conservative, comes in wanting to be at the centre of Europe and years later is isolated because Britain has a different agenda"? I am saying that we could put all that behind us. The idea that it would serve European interests to say, "Right, the relationship does not work, but we will not negotiate one jot," is wrong. If that is what the hon. Gentleman thinks of our partners, I do not understand why he is so keen on the partnership.

What could come out of the debate tonight is a recognition on both sides of the House that it is not in our interest or that of Europe to continue in this way. If we can honestly confront that, we could achieve something that has never even been thought of.

8.46 pm

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): My hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) was right to concentrate on the different backgrounds and attitudes of the European countries and their different expectations of the European Union. Our relationship with Europe has never been totally harmonious, because our expectations are different.

France has been marched over three times in 130 years. That affects the attitude of the French. They want not just bridges but close bonds with Germany. The Germans are conscious of their record. They were shaken after the war, and looking for markets for their manufacturers. Spain, Portugal and Greece have seen lack of democracy in quite recent years. I remember talking to a Greek friend who said, with his hand on his heart, "I was born a Greek, but I will die a European." That is not something that many British people would say. One might even say that he was putting his hand in the wrong place, bearing in mind the amount of money that has gone into Greece.

Italy has been politically unstable. I have heard many Italian politicians say that they would welcome the harmony and sense of continuity that would come from a strengthened European presence. The Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg really are at the heart of Europe, and they have gained enormously in stability and prosperity. Austria, Finland, Ireland and Sweden are distinguished by military neutrality. All those countries look to Europe in their different ways as a safeguard of their stability, democracy and freedom, whereas the United Kingdom has a different background. We stood alone during the war. We are Atlanticists, not only because of the shared language. We are traders. Our City is predominant. Our stocks, financial markets and insurance are extremely important as part of our national economy.

Yet both Harold Macmillan and my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) led us towards continental Europe, inspired not just by trade and business opportunities but, above all, by the desire to forge a more united Europe in which internal wars would not recur. In that, we have been triumphantly successful, and I welcome that initiative. However, we do not look to Europe as the safeguard of our democracy and freedom. Our background is different. The people of this country look to us in Westminster as the safeguards of our democracy and freedom.

There is a second strand of difference between us and our continental European allies. The United Kingdom is much closer to the United States than other European countries. That was demonstrated graphically in the bombing of Libya and Iraq. We co-operate in military intelligence. The United States is supreme in satellite intelligence, but we make our contribution to the joint international security situation. An indication of the value of American-British support was over the Falkland Islands, where we were given considerable support in intelligence and other matters.

With the United States and others, we have been partners in NATO for 50 years. Phase 1 was during the Warsaw pact. Phase 2 was when we saw the Warsaw pact collapse and the Berlin wall go down, leading inevitably to the garnering of the peace dividend, with 30 per cent. cuts in defence. The United States is now the only military superpower because of its technological drive and because the European defence effort is focused through so many different countries and command and control procedures.

We now look towards phase 3 of our co-operation with NATO and for a new NATO role. Should that role be more interventionist? Should Europe have a military capacity to cope with European problems? It is true that Europe needs what military people describe as sinews; we need intelligence, heavy-lift capacity for aircraft, command and control mechanisms and smart weapons. Not surprisingly, the United States supports European initiatives to promote a European leg for our defence; partly because the Americans have their own, other concerns—the Korean peninsula, the middle east, Taiwan and China.

It would be wrong to think that the US is obsessed with foreign intervention. The US is one of the world's most insular countries; less than 7 per cent. of its population hold a passport—indeed, some Congressmen regard it as a badge of pride not to possess a passport. However, in general, the American people—certainly the Senate and the House of Representatives—want fairer burden sharing, so there is support for the European security and defence initiative and for the defence capabilities initiative announced in April 1999.

We need to fold into the equation the common foreign and security policy—the CFSP—which, in February 1992, established a second pillar of the EU under the Maastricht treaty. The central point of the CFSP policy is included in the words

"the eventual framing of a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence."

There is a problem in mingling the defence capacities of NATO and the EU. Six countries are members of NATO, but not of the EU—Iceland, Norway, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Turkey—while four countries are members of the EU, but not of NATO; Austria, Finland, Ireland and Sweden are neutrals. Faced with that, with whom should the UK have chosen to explore such a difficult conundrum? Inexplicably, the Government chose France, whose principal characteristic in NATO matters is its reluctance to fall in line with international co-operation, especially that which it perceives to be American-led.

The NATO website states:

"France, which remains a full member of the North Atlantic Alliance and of its political structures, withdrew from the Alliance's integrated military structure in 1966. It does not participate in NATO's Defence Planning Committee, Nuclear Planning Group or Military Committee. Regular contacts with NATO's military structure take place through a French Military Mission to the Military Committee."

Those are the people with whom we have chosen to throw in our lot.

A Foreign Office press release, dated 25 November, states:

"We therefore call on the European Council in Helsinki to take a decisive step forward for the development of those military capabilities and for the setting up of the political and military instruments necessary to use them. This is necessary to give the EU the autonomous capacity to take decisions and, where the Alliance as a whole is not engaged, to launch and then to conduct EU-led military operations."

[Mr. Peter Viggers]

On page 3, it states that

"we call on the European Union at Helsinki . . . to endorse the proposal which the UK and France have put forward on the role and composition of a Military Committee and a military staff and the planning and conduct of EU-led operations.

That means that the UK has joined with France—the only member of NATO not to participate in the alliance's integrated military structure—to set up and promote a military committee and a military staff. At the time of the announcement of that initiative, President Chirac made it absolutely clear that France would not change its attitude to the integrated military structure—it will remain outside that structure.

By definition, the committee that we have created is outside the integrated military structure—exactly what the Americans most feared. Several hon. Members have quoted from the speech made at the Royal Institute of International Affairs on 7 October by Strobe Talbott, the Deputy US Secretary of State. He said clearly that

"the US is for ESDI."

He wants us to set up a European leg of security. He continued:

"will it help keep the Alliance together and that means the whole Alliance, European and non-European, EU and non-EU?

We would not want to see an ESDI that comes into being first within NATO but then grows out of NATO and finally grows away from NATO, since that would lead to an ESDI that initially duplicates NATO but that could eventually compete with NATO."

That is exactly what the Government are now proposing.

How could this be? I am convinced that the truth is that the Government's hope for a narrow agenda at Helsinki and the intergovernmental conference will be outflanked by a push for a wider agenda led by Mr. Prodi, the President of the Union. We are already sidelined by our abstention from the euro. The Government fear increasing isolation from European colleagues.

The Government have previously opposed European Union involvement in defence matters. The Government's switch appears to be an attempt to win euro credentials, but I fear that the price will be high. It will involve dilution of defence effort because of the confusion over NATO membership and EU membership. Moreover, it starts from the wrong point, even within the EU, because it starts from linking us with the French, who are not involved in the integrated military structure.

Defence is too serious to treat in that way. NATO has been our safeguard, and we weaken or dilute it at our peril. In that sense, I completely disagree with the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard), who felt that we should set up an independent defence leg in Europe.

There is a tendency to think that major, nation-threatening attacks will not occur, and that we should instead concentrate on lesser, localised conflicts. That cannot be guaranteed. We might again face nation-threatening attacks, and I plead that the Government avoid actions that might be thought to weaken NATO.

8.56 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I first met my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) in the early 1980s, when he was appointed by the Prime Minister to co-ordinate the efforts of those groups that were working with the Conservative party to undermine the movement for unilateral nuclear disarmament by the west. No one is more qualified than he to draw attention to the dangers to the North Atlantic alliance of what is being proposed by the creation of what is effectively an independent Europe defence policy separated from the United States. I warmly endorse the timely warning that my hon. Friend gave the House in his speech.

I recall that, at the time when my hon. Friend was leading that campaign to preserve our defences, I read a book by the late Ian Greig, called "They Mean What They Say". It was an attempt to warn democrats in the west that they should not disregard the rhetoric of Soviet leaders. I say that that also applies to the rhetoric of pro-federalist leaders in Europe today. They do mean what they say. What are they saying? I shall quote a few more examples for the record.

The German Finance Minister, Hans Eichel, who was hailed as a moderate when he replaced "red Oskar" Lafontaine, has said:

"I cannot imagine that Europe can successfully compete . . . without the prospect of a uniformly acting political union . . . The euro is not European unification, but it is one important step towards this end."

The German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, has said:

"My goal is to turn the EU into an entity"—

that is, a single thing—

"under international law."

The German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, has said:

"National Sovereignty will soon be a product of the imagination."

He has also admitted that

"The introduction of the common European currency was ultimately by no means only an economic decision. It was an original political act to hand over sovereignty over one of the most important areas of national authority to a European authority . . . For this reason alone, monetary union requires of us Europeans decisive advances in the field of political integration."

I mentioned in an intervention that the chief economist of the European central bank, Dr. Otmar Issing, has said,

"There is no example in history of a lasting monetary union that was not linked to political union."

Wim Duisenberg, the president of the European central bank, has said:

"The process of monetary union goes hand in hand, must go hand in hand, with political integration and ultimately political union. EMU is, and was always meant to be a stepping stone on the way to a united Europe."

I come right up to date and *The Times* of 4 November 1999. It reports the President of Germany, President Rau, calling for the European Union to be transformed into a "European Federal Union" complete with its own constitution. *The Times* states:

"He said the imminent enlargement of the EU meant that there must be 'decision-making procedures which guarantee Europe's capacity for action'".

At least, the president of the European Commission, President Prodi, is honest enough to admit that. According to *The Times* of 27 October, he wants the European Commission henceforth to be described as the "European government". *The Times* reports:

"Asked to justify the term 'government of Europe' Signor Prodi said: 'But what is the Commission? We are here to take binding decisions as an executive power. If you don't like the term

government for this, what other term do you suggest? Consultative commission? I speak of a European government because we take government decisions."

Funnily enough, in the middle of last month, the Prime Minister was quoted as saying that the reason he objected so strongly to the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) being Labour's candidate for the mayoralty of London was because of what the hon. Gentleman had done in the 1980s. The Prime Minister said:

"In the Eighties, when he was in charge of the Labour Party in London, we"—

that is to say the Labour party—

"were a byword for extremism . . . we were unelectable as a political party."

That was certainly true, and the Prime Minister should know all about it because he was part of that extremism. He stood for election to the House in 1983 on the following commitment. In his electoral address, he stated:

"We'll negotiate a withdrawal from the EEC which has drained our natural resources and destroyed jobs."

That is where the Prime Minister stood at that time. Yet he has the impudence to call those of us who want to be "In Europe, not run by Europe" "extremists". If we are extremists, we are extremists along with 64 per cent. of the British people.

I have commissioned ICM to ask a simple, single question at six-monthly intervals over the past year. That question is:

"Do you think that Britain should replace"—

it does not use pejorative words such as "abolish"—

"the pound with the single European currency?"

When I first asked that question in October 1998, the results were 32 per cent. "Yes" and 56 per cent. "No". By March of this year, those in favour of the euro had fallen from 32 per cent. to 30 per cent. and those in favour of keeping the pound had risen from 56 per cent. to 60 per cent. It was exactly 2:1 against the euro.

Now the gap is even greater. At the end of September this year, the results were 27 per cent. "Yes" in favour of the euro and a massive 64 per cent. "No" against it. That is almost identical to the figures that we used to get for comparable polls on the issue of unilateral nuclear disarmament in the early 1980s when the Prime Minister proudly wore his Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament badge and when he wanted, and called for, withdrawal from Europe in its entirety. Its policy on nuclear defence was an electoral albatross to the Labour party then, and its current policy will be an electoral albatross to it now, because two thirds of the British people disagree with it about abandoning the pound and replacing it with the single currency.

Mr. Gapes: Given the hon. Gentleman's great interest in opinion polls, has he seen those that point out that the majority of the British people think that this country will join the single European currency? Is he aware that an interesting development is taking place in Europe whereby this currency will be established over the next few years? Will he tell us—yes or no—whether he wants that currency to be a success or a failure?

Dr. Lewis: It is my view that the single currency is bound to be a failure, because it will force the states that subscribe to it to join together in a unified political entity, as all those quotations illustrate.

As to the point about polls showing that people who oppose the move nevertheless believe that it will happen, I assure the hon. Gentleman that the more people come to realise that they are the silent majority against joining the euro—a majority which is getting greater month by month—the more confident they will be that the battle will be won by those who want to preserve the pound and our sovereignty.

I shall make only one more point because I wish to leave time for two colleagues whom I believe want to speak. It was the great fallacy of Marxism that all politics is about economics. Marx tried to define politics in terms of economics, and I regret to say that the Government are doing precisely that in setting the criteria for whether this country should ever join the single currency. They say that the only criteria that they will apply are five economic tests.

I first raised that matter with the Prime Minister on 15 December 1997, when I asked him whether his position meant that

"no loss, however great, of political sovereignty would deter him and his Government from entering economic and monetary union, provided that what they regard as economic conditions alone were right".

His answer was very revealing. He said, "No," because of course he could not possibly agree with me, but he went on to confirm that it was precisely what his position meant. He said that

"it simply means that we should judge whether we enter monetary union according to our national interest, and"—

wait for it—

"that is defined by the economic tests that we have set."—[*Official Report*, 15 December 1997; Vol. 303, c. 36.]

I returned to the subject on 10 November, just three weeks ago, when I asked the Prime Minister at Question Time:

"What factors other than economic ones will determine whether Britain joins the single European currency."

He replied only:

"A decision will be taken on the basis of what is in Britain's best national interests."

I knew that he would say something like that, as I had asked it as a closed question. I was then able to respond and point out that he had not answered the question and that he had known for a fortnight that the question was not about economic tests but about whether there were any political tests at all that would influence whether Britain should sign away its economic, and therefore its political, independence.

In reply to my pressing him, the Prime Minister said:

"The national interest of course includes the economic conditions that we have set out, but . . . we believe that the national economic interest should be the determining factor in whether Britain joins the single currency . . . Our policy is the sensible one—leave the option open and determine it on the British national economic interest."—[*Official Report*, 10 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 1120-21.]

The Prime Minister is saying that, if the single currency works as it is intended to, and does not implode—as it may do, and as the exchange rate mechanism did—and creates a politically united Europe, he will want this country to join that structure and lose its independence for ever.

I conclude by reference to the remark of the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) about whether it is inevitable that Britain will join the single currency even

[Dr. Lewis]

though two thirds of the British people are manifestly opposed to it. There is only one way that it could happen, and that is if the country could be brainwashed by a tidal wave of propaganda, funded by Government money, to convince the people that there is no alternative.

All the signs are that this wretched Government will try to do that. They will try to rig the referendum by coming up with a complicated formula that will ensure that millions more pounds of public money are used to brainwash people into thinking that they have got to join the euro than can possibly be used to demonstrate that the euro is, in fact, a disaster waiting to happen.

The Government think that their strategy will work; it will not work. The British people will defeat them on that and force them to change their policy, just as they defeated Labour on its mad unilateralist policies in the 1980s, when the current Prime Minister was arguing for the extremist position—which is not the position of the Conservative party—that we should come out of Europe altogether.

9.9 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): In the 1999 Reith lectures, Anthony Giddens, the director of the London school of economics, refers to globalisation—this links in with the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis)—as being political, technological and cultural as well as economic. He had said earlier that he agreed with the radicals who say that the era of the nation state is over. I do not agree. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) said, there may be some at the centre of Europe, such as the Benelux countries, that can rightfully say that, but it is not true for most other countries in the European Union, including this country. I shall not be around to see what happens in 100 or 200 years' time, so I shall not make any forecasts.

I believe that, on the Conservative Benches, some things are the same as they were in 1975. There was a referendum that was lost by the anti-Common Market people—the anti-Europeans—and won by those who were, on a cross-party basis, in favour; the result confirmed our remaining within the Common Market. Three weeks later, there was a by-election in Greenwich, Woolwich, West in which I was elected as its Member of Parliament. I had the support of Neil Marten, who had been one of the leading lights among the anti-Europeans. He said that he wanted even those who had been on his side during the referendum to vote Conservative—for me—even though he and I did not hold the same views on the issue.

The Conservative party will continue to speak up for the views and the long-term interests of the people of Britain. Our position on the euro and other issues unites the spread of legitimate opinion that has been expressed in the debate. I was delighted when, yesterday evening, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) spoke as an officer of the Conservative group for Europe. He said that we should be in Europe, not out of it, and went on to talk about how we did not want to be ruled by Europe and about party policy at the next election. Those statements are worth repeating.

However, we on the Conservative side have a problem. Here, I am not making a national point, or a mainly European point, but a purely Conservative point. There are those who credit us with having done badly in the last general election in part because of the involvement of the Referendum party, which then became the Referendum Movement and is now the Democracy Movement, as the director of the Democracy Movement recently confirmed to me.

In the past two and a half years, the Conservatives have won back control of West Sussex county council; we not only held Arun district council, but increased our majority to a significant level; and we won back Worthing borough council. In the last national election—the June elections to the European Parliament—Labour lost and the Conservatives won. That might have come as a surprise to those who were guided by the opinion polls. In the week preceding the vote, I suggested to various political journalists that they ask Labour apologists how they would react if Labour got fewer votes than the Tories, but they thought that outcome so improbable that they did not bother. How much more fun it would have been if they had asked in advance, rather than waited until after the election to hear that the reason Labour lost was that fewer people voted for it. That is the nature of politics.

Let me now turn to the next general election. There is concern that the successors to the Referendum party might cause another Conservative defeat and that there will another overwhelming Labour majority that has the support of the Liberal Democrats, who consistently have been more in favour than Labour or the Conservatives of what can loosely be described as European integration. I shall briefly detain the House and quote my response to the first person who wrote to me on behalf of the Democracy Movement.

I told my correspondent how grateful I was to receive a postcard with my photograph on it. I had been told by that person that my response to various Europe-related questions would influence the way he voted in the Worthing, West constituency at the next general election. I suggested that he and the Democracy Movement should consider three points. I wrote:

"Any prospective candidate for MP who is swayed by cash for election expenses"—

which is what Paul Sykes offered at the last general election—

"or cash for this postcard campaign is in my view a political prostitute."

I asked my correspondent to tell those who thought up the approach that they would, in relation to me, be "a frustrated punter." Having been told that my replies would influence my correspondent's vote, I assured him that:

"Every voter and every candidate knows we have secret ballots so neither you nor I know how other people vote in the election."

I pointed out:

"You would only be able to vote for me or for another candidate in Worthing, West if you become a registered elector in the constituency."

I did that because my correspondent was holding out from a point outside my constituency the promise of voting for me. I ended with these words:

"With renewed thanks for the photograph, I remain unbribed and unbullied".

I believe that that is true of most members of the Conservative party.

9.15 pm

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Somewhat to my surprise, I found myself in agreement with the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) when he said that in his view the European Community could not continue much longer with a system of decision making which had been drafted by six member states in western Europe in the 1950s, which was now having to be applied to decision taking in a Community of 15, soon to number 20, 25 or perhaps 30 different and diverse member states.

As has been said, virtually every Member of whatever party in the House is pledged to support enlargement on both moral grounds and grounds of self-interest. We must confront the fact that in the light of enlargement, the decision-making processes in the European Union will have to be changed.

There are broadly two options available to us. One is that which was set out with coherence and fluency in the report from Mr. Dehaene, Lord Simon and former President von Weizsäcker. It is a perfectly honourable and openly espoused vision of a federal Europe, for want of a better shorthand term, where the prime focus of authority and loyalty would be to supranational European institutions. In the absence of a clear statement of direction from the Government, that is the sort of vision that I take the current Government to have in their mind too. That is given not only Lord Simon's former membership of the Government, but given what the Government have done in terms of signing up to the social chapter, seeking in principle to participate in economic and monetary union, their approach to the withholding tax and the extension of qualified majority voting, to which they have subscribed through the Amsterdam treaty.

I believe that that approach is profoundly wrong. My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) is advocating a more flexible Europe with the concept of flexibility written into the treaty of the EU. That is a common-sense and mature way in which to come to terms with the reality of a European Union which is increasingly diverse. I have yet to see evidence that the Government have come to terms with the nature and the gravity of the challenge which enlargement will mean for the entire EU. Some of the problems may be transitional, but we are talking about long transitional periods and long derogations. How realistic is it for us to think that a country such as Poland, let alone some of the south-eastern European states which have inherited the environmental catastrophes wrought by nearly half a century of communist rule, will accept as acquis communautaire, as is intended, the environmental standards written into the treaties and into European law?

How realistic is it for us to expect that it will be easy or quick for those countries in central or eastern Europe to impose tight border controls against the former members of the Soviet Union, such as Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation, while at the same time participating fully in the freedom of movement of persons, which they sign up to once they become members of the EU? How are the two things to be made compatible?

Some of these issues may be only short term but others seem to me to be more permanent. I question how long we can have one legal framework to govern agriculture or environmental policy when perhaps we shall have a European Union stretching from Rhodes to Reykjavik and from Estonia to the Canary Islands or to Madeira. I therefore urge my hon. Friend to stick firmly to and to develop the concept of flexibility that he outlined in his speech today. Conservatives should be confident and unashamed about advocating that such flexibility be written into the treaty at the forthcoming intergovernmental conference.

We can see some of the problems that may arise in the context of the on-going discussions about co-operation on justice and home affairs matters. I want to make it clear that I am completely in favour of practical, sensible co-operation between European countries in combating drug trafficking, fighting organised crime, and dealing with money laundering and international fraud. The habit of working together, which membership of the European Union encourages among its various member states, assists us in that co-operative work.

However, there are others on the continent of Europe who openly want to go much further than such co-operation and to have a common judicial system throughout the EU. They want it written into the Amsterdam treaty as a new objective that the EU should

"maintain and develop the Union as an area of freedom, security and justice."

In his comments at the press conference immediately following the Tampere summit, Mr. Prodi spoke about embarking on the long march to the goal of a common judicial system. Officials of the Finnish presidency appearing before the Select Committee on the European Communities in another place have called for a "single market" in justice and home affairs matters, and for qualified majority voting.

The Amsterdam treaty implies that we are at present in a transitional stage. It refers to five years until the Commission gains exclusive right of initiative under title IV, and five years until we move towards qualified majority voting on visas, asylum policy and immigration policy. At the Vienna summit, the Heads of Government agreed that within five years we should move to common measures and practical policies on asylum throughout the union.

The legal experts whose views I have read and sought on the fruits of Amsterdam say that as a consequence of the varied conflicts of national interest that were evident during the Amsterdam negotiations, we have ended up with a legal basis for justice and home affairs matters that is fragmented and complicated.

There are certain to be pressures from the Commission and from other member states at the forthcoming IGC for that to be clarified and made more coherent, and for a further push to be made in the direction of the communitisation of justice and home affairs matters. I hope that Ministers will reiterate their determination to resist such moves.

My final point relates to a matter referred to by the Foreign Secretary in his opening remarks, and by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) during his speech—the matter of openness and transparency with regard to proceedings of the European Council.

Having been a member of one of the European Standing Committees for the five years of the previous Parliament, I recall vividly, as someone charged with scrutiny of draft directives and other legislation on behalf of the House, the sense of frustration at being unable to discover what views

[Mr. David Lidington]

were being taken by other member states, and sometimes being unable to discover the view of our own Government with regard to forthcoming decisions.

That made the work of scrutiny difficult. It is not just a matter for occasional political debate. It is becoming something of a constitutional and democratic scandal that the European Council is, in effect, a legislature—not an Executive, but a body that takes decisions to agree to laws, which then become enforceable upon British citizens through the courts of this country, and that those decisions about law-making are taken in secret, without the press or the public knowing what is to be determined and what position is being taken by the various Governments represented at the Council. During the debate, I have detected common ground between members of different parties on the need for greater openness, which would be a prize well worth winning. I hope that the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues will pursue it with vigour.

9.25 pm

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): The debate has been colourful and lively, and many interesting contributions have been made from both sides of the House. I regret that time does not allow me to mention them all, and I hope that hon. Members to whose remarks I do not refer will forgive me.

We all agree that enlargement should be a priority for Helsinki. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) made the point eloquently when he said that it was more than a matter of economics. Other hon. Members made the same point.

Serious doubts about European integration have been expressed in the debate. The hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) put the case no less forcefully than my hon. Friends the Members for Stone (Mr. Cash), for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) and for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), who made characteristically powerful and lucid speeches.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) made a powerful speech on the single currency, about which he has been consistent over the years. I hope that he will not take it amiss if I say that his speech was marred only by his unfortunate reference to supermarkets.

Labour Members who expressed unreserved support for the Government's position were conspicuous by their absence. There was a mixed response from both sides of the House. Many hon. Members, including my distinguished hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney), who made a courageous speech, called for honesty and straightforwardness in the debate on Europe. The appeal for honesty and openness is common ground for many hon. Members.

Behind all the arguments lies one great difference of view. It is the difference between the two visions of Europe. Helsinki and enlargement brings to the fore the choice between them. The first is that of Romano Prodi and many other European centre-left leaders. It is the vision of a highly regulated European super-state, in which, as the President of the Commission said:

"QMV should become the norm".

That vision includes all the apparatus of the federal state: an army, converged legal systems and a Commission that looks, talks and acts like a Government. There is no point in Labour Members belittling that view because we have heard today an abundance of quotes, from Prodi and many others, which made that agenda explicit.

That vision contrasts sharply with the Conservative vision of a flexible, outward-looking, deregulated European Union, in which there will be a firm balance between the role of national Governments and that of EU institutions. The Helsinki summit presents a vital opportunity to set out and debate those choices once and for all.

Both sides of the House share a commitment to enlargement; we owe that to the former iron curtain countries. It is embarrassing that it has already taken so long. However, it will be accompanied by serious challenges to the European Union, which has already regulated too far, is—as the hon. Member for Hornchurch pointed out—incapable of managing its existing budget effectively, and struggles to retain the confidence of the people of Europe. Enlargement is a watershed and calls for far-reaching and visionary changes in the outdated, regulatory, interventionist model of Europe.

The Foreign Secretary, faced with that challenge, has proposed nothing that resembles a coherent strategy to tackle it. I fear that the Minister has been left with an enormous task in the limited time available for summing up. He must demonstrate that the Government are seriously addressing the challenges that enlargement poses, and that they recognise the enormity of the choices ahead. Those challenges are considerable and I shall list three or four of them.

The first challenge is creating a European Union that can allow for the flexibility to accommodate a much more diverse group of member states, ranging from Poland to Portugal. To most people, it is common sense that the same employment or social legislation cannot sensibly apply in Hungary as in Britain. That is what we mean by flexibility and the Conservative approach to it is modest and focused only on future legislation outside the core areas. That concept is being discussed in the report of the so-called three wise men and many European Governments support the idea that flexibility should be on the Helsinki agenda. The Government are unusual in saying that there should be no debate about flexibility, but that there should be a substantial extension of QMV. They are arguing for a rigid future for the EU, not flexibility, and they are nearly alone in so doing.

Secondly, there is the challenge of establishing a better check and balance to what has become the inherently regulatory tendency of the EU institutions. Even the most ardent integrationist must now accept that there is no point, in the context of enlargement, in piling regulation on to regulation when there is no chance of applicant countries such as Poland and Hungary meeting the existing directives for years to come. Enlargement must mean that we have already reached the high-water mark of regulation and higher hurdles in respect of cost-benefit and tests of practicality for new legislation should be built into the treaty.

Thirdly, there is the challenge of paying for enlargement, which was wholly unaddressed by the Foreign Secretary and remains wholly unaddressed by most member states. Everyone knows that the Berlin forecasts will be blown to bits when the new members enter the EU. The President of the Commission himself has said that he "assumes" that expansion will result in

the loss of the British rebate. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that: what is the Government's position and who will pay? *[Interruption.]* It is no good the Foreign Secretary shaking his head; that is what Romano Prodi has said. What is more, it is absolutely clear that, once there are 25 member states, the common agricultural policy will no longer be affordable and the Berlin projections will simply not hold water. Somebody has to pay.

Fourthly, the people of Britain will want to hear what the Government will negotiate into the treaty to protect their sovereign and democratic rights from further erosion. There are limits to integration and we are near those limits now. Treaty after treaty has eroded the democratic rights of people in this country and the time has come to clarify once and for all the roles and rights of democratically elected national Governments and the role of the EU.

Since coming to office, the Government have sought to improve relationships with our EU partners, but they have made the cardinal error of confusing friendship with negotiating weakness. They have adopted a conciliatory approach before negotiations have taken place and have failed to hold the line. The track record is one of going with the flow and my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) referred to many individual examples such as giving up the opt-out on the social chapter, the surrender of the veto in 16 areas at Amsterdam, the conceding of the principle on tax harmonisation and failing to insist on serious reform of the CAP. It goes on and on.

In their approach to the intergovernmental conference, the Government have started in similar vein, offering up the concessions before it even starts. In September, the policy was fairly clear: minimise the agenda, stick to the so-called leftovers from Amsterdam and the Cologne agenda and perhaps dish up a few concessions, hoping that it would all pass quietly. In September, the Minister's predecessor wrote to me—I have the letter here—to say that the Government

"supports the agenda set out at Cologne".

He went on to explain that he did not see reasons for extending that agenda, but even as that letter was being written the Prime Minister's very own Lord Simon was drafting another report that would comprehensively undermine that strategy and provide European leaders and the President of the Commission with an opportunity to expand the agenda.

Today, the Foreign Secretary acknowledged that in some respects that agenda has already started slipping beyond the one set out at Cologne. More than that, the Government's own MEPs have voted in the European Parliament to widen the IGC way beyond the Government's preferred agenda to include, among other things, reconsideration of the Amsterdam flexibility clause, which he ruled out earlier this evening. It will be interesting to see whether the Minister disowns his own MEPs tonight, or whether he will be definitive about what will and will not be on the IGC agenda as far as the Government are concerned.

While we are on the subject, let me add that the Government's friends in the Liberal party have been even more explicit. Liberal MEPs have voted in favour of the extension of qualified majority voting to all areas, including taxation—a fact that the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife neglected to mention.

The Government have already failed to rule out conceding the veto in approximately 19 new areas, and would receive nothing in return. It is no good saying that qualified majority voting has been the general rule in the past, because it has not been the general rule in those 19 areas. It will be in the future, however, and some of the 19 areas are vital to our national interests, including transport, supervision of credit institutions, Council procedure, own resources, co-operation with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, culture and the harmonisation of aid.

The Government have already accepted implicitly that they will concede a halving of the number of Commissioners. We understand the practical arguments for that, but it has been conceded before we have started. They have accepted that they will concede a reduction in the number of our MEPs, perhaps by as much as a third, and a reduction, after reweighting, of our share of the votes at the Council of Ministers. If we take that route, enlargement cannot amount to anything other than a substantial reduction of British influence in the European Union. It is folly to accept some of the proposed changes, and to make concessions, before we have even started, without negotiating—at the very least—safeguards of the kind that I mentioned earlier.

Not only are the Government in a muddle, and bereft of any clear strategy; they have offered the bargaining chips before we have started to play. It is not surprising that British public opinion is drifting into a more and more anti-EU stance—the figures have been quoted tonight—because, as many Members have pointed out, that increasingly negative shift is a direct consequence of the Government's unwillingness to come clean on their agenda, to make the choices explicit, to make the price of enlargement explicit to the British people, and to allow them to buy into both the costs and the benefit. It is a consequence of disillusionment, as treaty after treaty and regulation after regulation erode the democratic rights of the electorate.

The Government's duty is now to make the position and the choices clear, but what do we have? We have a Minister who is off on his bus, pootling around the country, mouthing banalities about the benefits of the single market. I hope that he has learned something from the experience; in particular, I hope that he has learned from Mr. Hopkins, who is quoted in today's *Financial Times* as saying:

"There was just not enough flesh on the bones for businesses . . . I used to be all for the euro, but what worries me is the pernicious onset of bureaucracy that goes with it."

Hear, hear.

I am sure that the House will take the Minister's reference to his travelling companions with the good humour that was doubtless intended. I understand that the leaflets in Hull refer to a new improved Vaz, but I fear that, if this is what that means, we would rather go back to the old version—classic Vaz, perhaps.

The Minister has a serious task ahead of him, and the sooner he gets off his bus and on to the job the better. The forthcoming negotiations will require great resolution, knowledge and wisdom. Nor is the country done any service by the tendency of the Government and the Foreign Secretary to make remarks about Conservative policy that imply in some sense that it is extremist, when it actually has the support of the majority of the British people.

[Mr. Archie Norman]

It is the hallmark of the closet federalist that every attempt to address the issues seriously, or to criticise today's inadequate structures, is described as prejudiced or extreme. It is naive and starry-eyed to go into the enlargement process without recognising that the existing institutions of the EU are already not without their problems, and that those problems must be tackled alongside enlargement. We have the problem of regulatory addiction. We have an EU that is already regulated too far, and has failed to implement existing directives: we have a backlog of 2,979 unimplemented directives. We have an EU that has not delivered some of the most basic tasks of the single market, and one that has proved incapable of handling its own budget professionally and without fraud, as the recent Court of Auditors report showed.

To make those points is not anti-European. They are facts against which enlargement must be planned. An EU of 25 member states must allow for flexibility and diversity. It must for its own viability retain its people's democratic support. That means clarifying and establishing once and for all the role of member states and of national Governments.

The summit marks the first stage in a treaty that deserves serious debate. It marks the final choice between the two opposing visions of Europe. The vision of the Conservative party is of an EU that is free trading, flexible, outward looking, deregulatory and enlarged. The Labour party's vision is of an EU that has the untrammelled powers and apparatus of a super-state—whether we call it that or not—envisaging the same laws, applied in the same way, in the UK as in Poland, and more regulation, not less.

The time has come for the Government to come clean on their intentions. Do they support the Prodi agenda? No longer is it possible to pretend that the federalist vision is not writ large on the face of the treaty agenda. The Government would like to say one thing in Brussels, another in Westminster and another in Helsinki, but no longer can they belittle the treaty. It is in many respects the endgame that will determine the shape of EU institutions for decades to come. Let it be the beginning of a new, flexible, enlarged and free-trading Europe. Let it not be the endgame for the freedom of democratically elected national Governments.

9.42 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): Debates that precede European Council meetings are excellent opportunities for hon. Members to express their views on the important decisions that lie ahead—in this case, at Helsinki next Friday. I join my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary in commending the way in which the Finnish Government have handled the presidency. It is a model for other countries.

Conservative Members' speeches on Europe were, as usual, like a box of Celebrations—colourful, but different. No one view was the same as another. It would be churlish of me not to thank the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) for his kind comments on my appointment. He asked whether I would last longer than my predecessor, but I imagine that, with all the speculation about the future role of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), it is probably the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon who should worry about job security.

No such worries affect the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman). He seems already to have three jobs and is eyeing up another. Not content with being the shadow Minister for Europe, he has a golden handcuffs deal with Asda, is a putative Conservative candidate for mayor of London, and is the brains behind the reverse takeover of the month—that of a company named, appropriately, Nutsford. His various employments bring new meaning to the word "enlargement."

For reasons that the Foreign Secretary has made clear, the Helsinki Council will be a landmark Council. Enlargement will be the main business. We have heard a clear statement on the issue from the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon, the shadow Foreign Secretary. He stated unequivocally that, if the Conservative party were ever in a position to do so, it would block enlargement because it would not sign up to any treaty that did not include flexibility. It is an odd way in which to support the case for enlargement. It seems to be completely at odds with comments of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells.

In the time available, I will try to deal with the points that have been raised. The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon accused the Government of being involved in a sell-out of NATO. Nothing could be further from the truth—NATO is the cornerstone of our defence policy. The common foreign and security policy will work in tandem and complement our relationship with NATO. We have made that clear at every opportunity. It was certainly made clear when I attended the historic meeting of the General Affairs Committee of the Council, when Defence Ministers joined Foreign Ministers in supporting this Government's initiative on a common foreign and security policy.

We shall keep close to NATO. As soon as we completed our discussions in the General Affairs Committee, we met the non-EU NATO members and other countries which had reason to want to be kept informed of developments. It is rubbish to suggest that we are in any way sidestepping our role with NATO.

The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon should be ashamed of himself for not supporting what my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary have said about the withholding tax. The Government are in no way prepared to support the tax because of the devastating effect that it would have on the eurobond market. That is why we have fought so hard to prevent it being imposed. He knows that and should be supporting the Government.

The hon. Gentleman should also be supporting the Government's action on the droit de suite, which he also mentioned. Ministers are fighting day in, day out to protect our position. The blocking minority on the droit de suite remains. There will be further discussions on 7 December on that important issue and we shall stick to our policy.

The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) referred to the charter of rights. I am surprised at him, because I made it clear in my evidence to the Scrutiny Committee that it is a charter of existing rights. It sets out the rights that have been granted to EU citizens as a result of treaties and legislation. It is not binding or enforceable. It is a charter,

as we have said, not a new treaty. It is right that we should send the distinguished lawyer Lord Goldsmith as our representative on the drafting Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) has told me that unfortunately he cannot be present for the closing speeches. He was right to say that on 1 May 1997 there was a sea change in the relationship between this country and the rest of Europe. He said that that was important, because at last we have a Government prepared to defend the interests of the United Kingdom, fully engage with our partners and ensure that this country's interests are paramount. As the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), the former Deputy Prime Minister, said, no one can wield a handbag from an empty chair. For far too long, this country's negotiations were conducted by those who did not want to engage with our European partners.

My hon. Friend was also right to mention the importance of meeting the expectations of the people of Hungary, Poland and the other applicant countries. I have visited Hungary and Poland, where there is a tremendous mood of expectancy. Those countries are working very hard with EU negotiators to ensure that they meet the necessarily tough criteria set down in the acquis. I am confident—

Mr. Cash: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Vaz: No; the hon. Gentleman has had a lot of time to put his views forward and I shall come to him later in my speech.

The sooner that the tough negotiations are completed, the better. We have made it clear that there is a self-imposed deadline. The European Union has to be ready for enlargement by 2002. We hope that the negotiations will be completed as soon as possible. When they are, the deal has to be ratified by the member Parliaments, so it will be some time before it comes into force. We shall be ready by 2002 and we shall do everything that we can to help the applicant countries.

The eloquent right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) rightly talked about the values of freedom and democracy, and the political advantages for the new democracies. It would be quite wrong for the EU to turn its back on these new countries. We believe that it is important that the EU should be as wide as possible, and that it should not be exclusive. It should allow entry to countries which meet the terms and conditions required—not just the Copenhagen criteria, but all the other economic criteria implicit in joining the EU.

On Turkey—a subject raised by a number of right hon. and hon. Members—our position has always been that Turkey should be confirmed as a candidate in Helsinki. No special conditions should be applied to Turkey. We understand all the points that have been made today—including by the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley)—on human rights. We are aware of that, as are the Turkish Government. However, it is not right that special conditions should be applied to countries seeking to become candidates. We hope that that will be confirmed at Helsinki.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams)—an old friend of mine from my days in the corridor at the cloisters—reminded us of the divisions within the Conservative party and of the pivotal role that Britain now plays not just in Europe, but in the world. As the Prime Minister said in his Lord Mayor's speech on Monday—and as the Foreign Secretary repeated the day after—it is important that this country should play its role not just in European affairs, but world affairs.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr mentioned the euro. Our position on the euro has been clear since 1997. Five economic tests have to be met and, once they are met, there will be a referendum. In the end, it will not be the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon or I who decide by vote of this Parliament—it will be the British people who decide whether we join the euro. However, we will be in that position only when those crucial economic tests have been met.

The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) is one of the most passionate and principled Members on the EU. He did not change his mind under the previous Government, or under this Government—as some hon. Members have done. There have been some remarkable conversions over the past few years. He wanted to know the Government's position on tax. The Government approach taxation in the EU in the way that we approach all other European issues—with a hard-headed assessment of what is in the British national interest. The UK is working actively and constructively with our European partners while retaining the national veto over tax. The hon. Gentleman described himself as this House's very own Jonah. I wonder which of his colleagues would be prepared to play the whale.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) was right to say that we must look at the size of the Commission. That is the purpose of the IGC—it is one of the key issues to be discussed. If a number of countries are to join the European Union, all of which have an emotional attachment to having their own Commissioners, the Commission will get too big and bureaucratic. It is important that we look at the structure of the Commission. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said that the larger countries were prepared to give up their second Commissioner provided that—but only then—there is a reweighting of votes on the European Council.

We heard an excellent speech from the hon. Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney)—but how mean of the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) to describe the hon. Gentleman as a semi-grandee. I thought that once one received one's knighthood within the Conservative party, one became a full grandee. The hon. Member for Wycombe was right to say that certain sections of the press have been poisoning the minds of sections of the British people. It is vital that we have an honest debate about the issue. I respect the hon. Gentleman for being able to do so, bearing in mind the views of some of his colleagues. Like the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East, he has not changed his mind in the way that the personality of the Leader of the Opposition has changed. He has remained firm to his principles, for which I respect him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) asked whether we would publish a White Paper on economic and monetary union. There are no proposals for one at this stage, because the issue is not before the British people. On the fair distribution of propaganda for either side, of course it is important that everyone should have an opportunity to put his case.

[Mr. Vaz]

It was a delight to hear from the hon. Member for Stone. He reminds me of the character in the film "In the Line of Fire". He is obsessed with Mr. Prodi. I am sure that if we burst into his bedroom we would find faded newspaper cuttings about Mr. Romano Prodi on the wall. He said that he was against withdrawal from the European Union, but then said that he wanted to renegotiate the treaties—just like that. Neither he nor the hon. Member for Teignbridge had an answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard), who asked what would happen when our partners refused to renegotiate. The logic of the attitude adopted by certain Conservative Members is withdrawal.

Mr. Nicholls: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Vaz: No; the hon. Gentleman has had his chance.

The hon. Member for Stone assured his Front-Bench colleagues that they were on-message. I wish that he could have seen the face of the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon when he said that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford was right to re-emphasise NATO's role.

In a careful and thoughtful speech, the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Sir D. Madel) spoke of the importance of the northern dimension. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary asked me to represent the Government at the northern dimension conference. It is absolutely right that we should engage with Russia on these issues, and the Russian Foreign Minister was present. We were forthright in criticising the Russians over Chechnya—my right hon. Friend wrote a letter to that effect—but it was also right to be at the conference and to continue the dialogue that had started via the Finns. We will put a great deal of time and effort into ensuring that the northern dimension is a success.

The right hon. Member for Caernarfon said that he felt that Wales was being left out. I assure him that there is no reason to worry. I agree that it is very important to ensure that Wales and Scotland get a fair share of European money. That is why the Government fought hard and successfully to obtain the best ever structural funds deal in Agenda 2000 negotiations in March, including objective 1 status. For the first time ever, west Wales and the valleys will get funding.

What can I say about the hon. Member for Teignbridge? He demonstrated humility. He quoted from letters going back to 1960. Goodness knows what the cupboards in his bedroom must look like. I assure him that his worst fantasies will never be realised. He, too, wanted to renegotiate the treaties—and he believes that our partners would accept that. No, they would not.

Mr. Nicholls: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Vaz: No; I have dealt with the hon. Gentleman's point. There is no need for him to jump up again.

The hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) tried to put France against Britain on the common foreign and defence policy. France and Britain are on the same side and, properly, leading on the issue. That is why, at the end of the Anglo-French summit last Thursday there was enormous support for the views that we had propounded.

The hon. Members for Stratford-on-Avon and for Tunbridge Wells talked about the Government's roadshow. The roadshow has demonstrated to me that the British people want to engage in a serious debate about Europe and have overwhelmingly supported our decision to go out and talk to them about it. Since 1 May 1997, we have fully engaged in Europe. We fight hard for the national interest and to ensure that we do the best for the people of this country and of Europe.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 8th December, any Motion in the name of Mr. William Hague relating to the Postal Privilege (Suspension) Order 1999 (Revocation) Order 1999 may be proceeded with as if Standing Orders Nos. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) and 17 (Delegated legislation (negative procedure)), were applicable thereto.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Planning Laws

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

10 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight two specific issues raised by the intention of the McDonald's chain of restaurants to open a takeaway restaurant on the site of a former public house in the west Harrow part of my constituency. The first issue is the use of the A3 classification in planning law, and the second the way in which social audits and social reporting could stimulate responsible companies to achieve effective dialogue with local communities about the siting of their business premises over and above what is currently required by planning law.

One week from today, McDonald's is expected to open a takeaway restaurant on the site of the former Hungry Horse public house at the junction of Shaftesbury avenue, Shaftesbury circle and Porlock avenue in my constituency, right next door to the excellent Whitmore high school. McDonald's has made it clear in local newspapers that it sees the restaurant attracting customers from beyond its immediate locality—according to its spokeswoman, it will be

"a facility for everyone in south Harrow".

Many local residents are, not surprisingly, worried that what is now a quiet and pleasant area will have to suffer extra traffic, extra disruption, increasing levels of pollution, new levels of noise and additional litter. They ask why no one has consulted them about whether a restaurant should be there at all.

McDonald's has had to submit a planning application to the local authority for—crucially—only the external works to the restaurant, which would create a drive-through facility beside the sit-down restaurant. The use of sites as restaurants and public houses is covered by the same site designation in planning law—class A3, as laid down in the Town and County Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987. In essence, because McDonald's has chosen a site with an existing A3 designation for its restaurant, there is nothing the local community, or the council on its behalf, can do to require the same level of full and detailed scrutiny of the plans as would be required if the site were designated differently.

A site that had little impact on the next-door school when it was a quiet public house, in a pleasant residential area—albeit with a small shopping parade, but no industry or major shopping centre close by—is soon to see a brash new owner with inevitably more intensive usage and the resulting greater impact on the community. Because no distinction is made in planning law between restaurants and public houses, the local planning authority—Harrow council—much to the frustration of local councillors and planning officials, cannot properly explore the change of use.

Many of my constituents who live in the immediate area around the site have formed the Shaftesbury campaign against McDonald's—SCAM—to highlight the difficulties posed by the development. SCAM has worked closely and very effectively with local people and councillors, and has completed research into similar developments elsewhere. In addition, Councillors Huw Davies, Norman Stillerman and Navin Shah, who is the chairman of Harrow council's development and planning committee, have all highlighted their concerns about the current wide range of the A3 designation.

My constituents have a number of concerns about locating such a large fast food takeaway restaurant in a residential area. The restaurant will inevitably have to attract a large volume of traffic to the site to be viable. There are already considerable traffic and parking problems in the area caused by the narrow roads and the fact that the majority of houses were built without garages. Approaching the site by car usually requires careful weaving in and out of parked cars. Inevitably, the concern is that the restaurant will result in busier roads, more congestion and increased danger to pedestrians, to cyclists and, especially, to the children who attend Whitmore high school next door. Because Whitmore is the borough's designated school for children with physical disabilities, there has been and remains heightened concern about the additional traffic flows that a restaurant will provoke to and from the site during the school day.

The site is serviced by bus routes, but the location of the restaurant is unlikely to help both Government and local council ambitions to reduce demand for car travel. Indeed, the additional traffic the restaurant will generate could potentially wipe out the benefits of the substantial investment that has been made to provide priority to 140 bus journeys along local routes.

It is also worrying that the proposed vehicle exit from the site, rejected by the planning committee, is next to a bus stop. That could make exit from the site by car dangerous for drivers, pedestrians and bus users. It is an issue of particular concern to the school.

Shaftesbury circle is already a busy roundabout with congestion problems in the rush hour. A quiet public house added little to the difficulties, but there is no doubt that a busy takeaway restaurant could cause further significant problems.

There is no doubt also that the amenity of my constituents in the area close to the site could suffer. They are worried about additional litter being generated, and about the extra nuisance from noise and light at night, as the site would clearly attract people away from nearby town-centre areas to this quiet residential district.

I am also especially worried that because of the wide range of the class A3 designation, the local planning authority has been unable to consider the impact of a restaurant on the amenity of the site's most immediate neighbour, Whitmore high school. Whitmore is recognised by Ofsted as a school of very high standards, with 95 per cent. of last year's GCSE students gaining eight GCSEs or more. More than 54 per cent. gained grades between A* and C, and the most successful 45 students gained 424 GCSEs between them.

No doubt placing a takeaway restaurant so close to a large school population is a powerfully attractive proposition to the owners of the restaurant chain, as the school could provide a very lucrative market. However, the restaurant could be the source of some disruption to the life of the school. The boundary of the site is extremely close to the location of key classrooms used for teaching music and drama, so the potential for lessons to be disrupted by noise is clearly a concern.

In addition, the restaurant's close proximity to the school will undoubtedly inhibit the current smooth arrangements for checking the dispersal of students at the

[Mr. Gareth R. Thomas]

end of the day. Unless McDonald's can provide suitable assurances that the children will not be served at all during the school day, the restaurant will provide further potential distractions to the school population.

The opportunity to consider all these issues, and therefore the appropriateness of the Shaftesbury circle location for a takeaway restaurant, was denied because the site already had a class A3 designation. However, if the site had been designated differently, and if the full and proper level of scrutiny of this particular application had taken place, that would not necessarily have prevented problems in the future.

At the moment, when planning permission is being granted for a change of use to A3 designation, it is not even possible to impose conditions that mean that the site could be used only for a public house or a restaurant. Indeed, attempts to do so by planning authorities have been overturned on appeal, with costs awarded against the authorities.

I recognise that it is right that development must, on occasion, be facilitated. However, my constituents have been extremely concerned at the restriction placed on their local council's ability to consider this development and therefore to examine its impact on them, simply because no change in site designation is involved. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will be aware of previous representations on this issue—from my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), from the London planning advisory committee, the Local Government Association and from Harrow council, as well as other concerned local authorities. I therefore urge my hon. Friend the Minister to give further thought to whether the current A3 classification is not drawn too wide.

Many of my constituents sense that McDonald's was well aware of the way in which planning laws would operate on this site. They ask why McDonald's chose not to consult them until after the planning application had been submitted. Local people—a key stakeholder group that is affected by McDonald's selection of this site for the restaurant—feel that they have been presented with a fait accompli and that they must expect to have to accept the inevitable. Where their views have been formally expressed, they are being ignored by the company, which is now hoping that a planning inspector will find in its favour over the drive-through element of the plans.

It is difficult not to have some sympathy with the view put to me by one constituent that the attitude and behaviour of McDonald's have amounted to little short of premeditated corporate arrogance. Certainly, the behaviour of McDonald's has not appeared to be that of a socially responsible business, nor that of a business keen to build relationships with local people.

Increasingly, the wider business world recognises that questionable social, environmental and ethical behaviour affects the bottom line and that ignoring the needs of stakeholders such as local people can bring with it damaging disruptive publicity. Companies as diverse as Shell, Monsanto and Nike have suffered poorer corporate performance because of high-profile negative publicity generated as they ignored important social dimensions to their business activity.

It is a truism that we live in the knowledge economy. Information flows are considerably greater than ever before and, increasingly, the reputation of a company affects its financial performance. Information about social and environmental liabilities is increasingly sought by investors keen to minimise their risks. There is growing recognition that competitive advantage derives in part from a business's relationship with its stakeholders, including the communities in which it seeks to operate. Social auditing and reporting, like the parallel environmental reporting that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has rightly sought to promote, provide a framework for producing information beyond merely the financial headlines that is of value to shareholders and stakeholders alike.

The big accounting firms are developing new wings of their businesses to support companies through social audits. Organisations such as the excellent New Economics Foundation and the Institute of Social and Ethical Accountability increasingly advise companies and provide auditing services that mirror the international work of, for example, the global reporting initiative. Initiatives such as the voluntary SA8000 scheme launched by the Council on Economic Priorities are already being used by Toys 'R' Us and several other European retailers. The AA1000 standard launched in Copenhagen on 15 November is being used by the Co-operative bank to audit its award-winning social report. Such initiatives are heightening awareness of the potential of social reporting.

According to Forum for the Future, around 30 big companies, including 20 of the FTSE top 100, are involved in substantive social reporting. The Body Shop's social report included sections covering social, environmental and animal-testing performance and has been widely praised as a model. Shell International's social report won praise from some as

"a groundbreaking display of corporate soul-searching",

with many of the company's critics acknowledging that a significant step forward had been taken.

The Co-operative bank's partnership report was a key part of its business strategy, combining a financial report with an account of the bank's impacts on its key partners: its shareholders, customers, staff, suppliers, local communities and so on. That has undoubtedly been a factor in its profits tripling since 1994.

Other recent social reports have featured levels of employee satisfaction, information on health and safety records, levels of compensation that had to be paid out and the degree to which child labour was used. In the context of this debate, such reports can involve the degree of community involvement in selecting where to site parts of the business.

Social auditing and reporting is a young process, albeit one with growing heavyweight business support. The Government need to give the process a friendly steer to encourage business to consider more carefully its impact on all stakeholders, including local communities. Government must monitor the standards and processes being used by social auditors to ensure that, over time, they are credible and rigorous.

I hope that the Government will take the opportunity provided by the company law review to engage in a dialogue with business organisations about how to encourage greater transparency and reporting of companies' relationships with all their stakeholders.

BT produced its first social report this summer. Independently verified, it would not have been 100 per cent. comfortable reading for shareholders. However,

BT received a broadly favourable verdict, albeit with suggested improvements, from the verifiers. BT chairman Iain Vallance said:

"There are those that believe that a concern with essential values or indeed the community at large is incompatible with the business aim of creating shareholder value and that managers should focus on making profits and steer clear of difficult compromises and trade-offs involved in trying to balance the interests of various constituencies. This is a misplaced belief."

McDonald's will open its restaurant in west Harrow a week from today. The lack of consultation by the company, or through the planning system, has caused real frustration among my constituents. I hope that, to protect other communities from being similarly affected, my hon. Friend the Minister will now consider amending the A3 classification used under planning law and examine the opportunities to encourage effective social audit and reporting.

10.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) on his success in securing this debate and on raising an important aspect of the Government's planning policy. I know that he will understand that I cannot comment on the merits or otherwise of the specific local case that has prompted him to obtain the debate. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has a formal role and responsibility in the planning appeals process. However, I can set the case within the context of the general legislative and policy position, and I hope that I can make some comments in which my hon. Friend will find some comfort.

It may be helpful if I begin by clarifying the relevant legislation. The Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987, which, for the sake of brevity, I will refer to as the use classes order, sets out classes of land use, as my hon. Friend will know. It sets out four classes of land use—A, B, C and D. Changes within each of the individual classes do not constitute development under the law at the moment and so do not require planning permission.

The use classes order is a well-established deregulatory measure within the town and country planning system. It was introduced on the grounds that the changes of use that it permits would each have a broadly similar impact, for instance, in terms of noise, traffic generation and appearance. That was an assumption made at the time the orders were introduced. The intention is to strike an appropriate balance between facilitating development and encouraging enterprise, and protecting local amenity and environment.

In general terms, across the country as a whole, the UCO plays an essential role in delivering a positive, proactive planning service that enables businesses and local communities to thrive. It removes from businesses and others the requirement to seek planning permission from the local planning authority for uses that are generally uncontroversial and do not adversely impact on local amenity. The UCO is kept under review so that problem areas can be addressed or particular matters clarified. Overall, it is considered to be working reasonably well. Since 1987, only five amendments have been made. That is the general context.

Class A3 is relevant to the case that my hon. Friend has raised. It comprises uses for the sale of food and drink for consumption on the premises and of hot food for consumption off the premises. So the class may include restaurants, cafés, wine bars, public houses and take-away establishments. The A3 class was introduced to reflect the loosening of the then traditional boundaries between different types of catering establishments. The aim was to enable the trade to adapt to changing trends and demands and, therefore, for the general public to have greater choice in their areas.

In general, across the country as a whole, the freedom to change use within the food and drink class has caused little difficulty. However, as my hon. Friend has said, my Department has received a number of representations, including correspondence from some of my hon. Friend's constituents, from the London planning advisory committee and from the Local Government Association as well as a number of London authorities. Their concern is that some of the changes of use within the A3 class—for example, to use as a themed pub or a super-pub or from a pub to a take-away—because of the way in which the different outlets have developed over time, can lead to new or more intensive activity and give rise to issues of parking, noise and public order that arguably ought to be examined through the planning system. The argument has been put that some specific changes, perhaps such as that described by my hon. Friend, raise substantially different issues within a locality that deserve examination.

Of course, there are other extensive controls outside the planning system that can be used by local authorities to remedy problems with matters such as parking, noise and public order. For example, local authorities have wide-ranging powers to prevent or abate noise under part III of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. In addition, they can issue street litter control notices and so on.

However, I realise that there are concerns as to the efficacy of existing controls, and I assure my hon. Friend that we are giving those concerns careful consideration. We are taking some actions that may go some way to reassure him that we are considering the issues that he has raised about change of use within the A3 class.

The White Paper on the future of transport contained a commitment to look for ways of improving the planning system's delivery of an integrated transport strategy. That included a review of the changes of use allowed under the UCO to establish their transport implications in relation to traffic generation and parking. I hope that my hon. Friend will be pleased to learn that, in commissioning a study into improvements to the planning systems delivery of an integrated strategy, we have included a comprehensive investigation of the impact of changes within the A3 class. That will form a specific strand of the study. It will consider not only the transport-related effects of such changes, but the impact on local amenity and the environment—for example, litter, noise and relationships with other land uses in the area.

My Department has just circulated a specification of the research to organisations that have expressed an interest in undertaking that work. Early next year, a tender for the whole study—including the elements that I outlined—will be let, and the report will be completed by next summer. We shall then consider the research findings and the recommendations alongside the representations that we have already received on the subject. That will allow us to come to a view on whether there are significant

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

problems, and their nature and extent. We shall then consider our response to the problems identified by the report. I hope that that offers my hon. Friend some comfort. We shall certainly consider the findings of the study as soon as possible.

The aim of the Government's planning policy for town centres is relevant to the debate. Our policy, as set out in planning policy guidance note 6, is to regenerate existing town centres and high streets. Sustaining town centres depends a great deal on the flexible use of floor space. It is widely acknowledged that vacant properties are a blight on town and district centres. The UCO helps business to respond quickly to changing demands. Keeping premises open and occupied can also have the effect of protecting other businesses in the area.

However, PPG6 acknowledges that problems can arise when changes of use—such as from shops to restaurants—create new concentrations of single uses, such as restaurants, bars or takeaway food outlets; there can be cumulative effects that cause local problems. Proposals for change of use in those circumstances should be assessed as to their contribution to diversification, and as to their cumulative effects on such matters as the loss of retail outlets, traffic and parking. Although I realise that town centres may not be the main issue in the debate, measures exist whereby local authorities can consider the impact of change of use on them.

My hon. Friend mentioned the value of social auditing. We are aware of work in that area, which, as my hon. Friend said, has the aim, at first instance, of improving the economies and environments of developing countries by setting out clearly the commitments and responsibilities of business and other stakeholders. I know that the Department for International Development works closely with all its development partners, including the United Nations, in supporting social auditing as a means of promoting socially responsible businesses which have positive impacts on all their stakeholders.

My hon. Friend requested that the Government give a friendly steer to the adaptation of that concept to the planning system in the UK. I can give him that reassurance. We fully endorse that type of partnership between central and local government, non-governmental organisations, businesses and the wider community, whereby the commitments and responsibilities of all stakeholders across a range of policy areas are clearly set out.

In that context, my hon. Friend may be pleased to know that, following our planning concordat with the Local Government Association, that association is now working on a planning users concordat with the business and voluntary sectors. That will set out the roles, priorities and responsibilities of all three parties. It will highlight the essential contribution of the voluntary and business sectors to planning decisions, encourage positive engagement and promote effective collaboration, and it will provide a valuable framework for co-operation. When there are specific concerns about a particular local business, it is generally the case that socially responsible companies are happy to meet local residents and local authorities to seek ways in which their concerns may be addressed.

I fully recognise the examples of good practice that my hon. Friend cited in his speech. The planning users concordat is all about fostering good practice, and it is to be hoped that more businesses will opt into that mode of meeting concerns in the local community where they are considering developing.

The Government are aware that some aspects of the use classes order—particularly the operation of class A3—have caused concern in some locations and in some specific cases. Our forthcoming research has been expanded to investigate fully the issues and concerns raised during the debate. We would need evidence of widespread and significant problems throughout the country to justify amending the UCO, but we are not averse to amending it if we find that there are such problems.

The UCO, as it stands, offers some valuable freedoms and flexibilities, which enable business to respond to changing circumstances. Nevertheless, I can assure my hon. Friend that we want to continue to monitor the operation of the order and assure ourselves that the problems that he has described are not widespread. If they are widespread, we shall respond to that concern.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing these issues to our attention today.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 2 December 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Learning and Work Bank

1. **Mrs. Christine Butler** (Castle Point): If he will make a statement on his plans for the new learning and work bank. [99340]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): As part of a major programme to modernise the Employment Service, the learning and work bank will be launched in autumn 2000, bringing together, for the first time in one place, information about learning opportunities provided by the university of industry's "learndirect", Employment Service job vacancies and information about careers.

Mrs. Butler: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. I am excited by the prospect of a one-stop shop on a website to match jobs to those without jobs and to enable employers easily to find the right recruit. I welcome the fact that that will also be linked to upskilling information. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House about the existing experiments in certain areas so that my constituents can be encouraged by the prospect of the new scheme starting in autumn next year?

Ms Jowell: I agree with my hon. Friend that we have to seize every opportunity to use new technology to improve and modernise public services, including the use of public-private sector partnerships, to ensure that the unprecedented opportunities for work—the largest number of people in work and the largest number of vacancies for a generation—are taken up and people without jobs are linked to job vacancies.

My hon. Friend also made the important point that that project is being developed through pilots. Those who observe our proceedings would be disappointed if they did not hear the term roll out used at least once in Education and Employment questions, so, building on the experience of the 12 pilots, we will roll out the learning and work bank, with the supporting services, in autumn next year.

Learning and Skills Council

2. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What representations he has received on proposals for a new Learning and Skills Council. [99341]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): We have received more than 1,100 responses to our White Paper, "Learning To Succeed". More than 90 per cent. were in favour of our proposals.

Mr. Chapman: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the system he inherited from the Conservatives was wasteful, bureaucratic and incapable of producing high standards across the board and that what he has introduced is not simply an administrative change, but a step change that will provide a coherent, high quality system of support for skills and knowledge that will generate real savings and benefit directly those involved?

Mr. Blunkett: Not only do I agree with what my hon. Friend says about the importance of those changes, but so do the CBI, the British Chambers of Commerce and the national council of the National Training Organisation, which has said that it sees the reform of the delivery of post-16 education and training as a golden opportunity to put right the legacy of individual under-achievement and business under-performance.

Major companies have underlined that, including BP, which has said:

"We agree strongly with the need to change. The bureaucracy of the existing system makes it very difficult for a national employer like us to access funding on a national basis for NVQ assessment."

All those organisations are in the business of business. They know what they require and they will now have a much clearer directive to assist in making the changes work on the ground.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Would not the Secretary of State accept that the devil is not only in the detail of his proposed changes but in the principle of them? With further education colleges warning about the threat to their autonomy and their ability to deliver in response to local needs, with local education authorities worried about the threat to their budgets from top-slicing for the Secretary of State's pet projects, with business concerned about being marginalised in decision making and with the threat to school sixth forms whitewashed but still unresolved, is not there a real danger that the Secretary of State may run out of friends?

Mr. Blunkett: Given the lack of investment in repair and maintenance in schools around the country, whitewashing would be a positive gain for some of the schools that we inherited. The business community is very satisfied with my announcement of 28 October, and it supports the changes, for the reasons that I read out a moment ago.

The business community believes that coherent investment, the purchaser-provider split and the involvement of business in decision making are crucial to making the changes work. That is why it supports the changes that we have announced, which are long overdue. The era of confusion, bureaucracy and top-slicing, when

money went anywhere except into training, is coming to an end. I am pleased that we have been able to take this step in this Parliament, rather than in the next.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): Would my right hon. Friend say what role he sees for the lifelong learning partnerships in the new arrangements? Does he share my view that they are central to identifying local need and to encouraging local collaboration? Will he ensure that they have the support and the resources that they need to do that very important job?

Mr. Blunkett: Not only will we ensure that they have sufficient resources this year, but we will allocate resources for next year to ensure that their continuing work can be developed. My hon. Friend is entirely right: those partnerships are very important in pulling together providers, thus giving a coherence that prevents gaps in local provision from emerging while dealing with the questions raised by the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell).

Education SSA

3. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): When he will next meet the relevant Minister in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to discuss the education standard spending assessment in shire counties; and if he will make a statement. [99342]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): The Government announced in November 1998 a three-year review in partnership with local government to look for a way of distributing revenue support grant that is simpler, more stable, more robust and fairer than the present arrangements for SSAs. The Government do not expect to discuss or make fresh changes to the method of calculation of SSAs while that review is taking place.

Mr. Fabricant: Further to the question put to the Prime Minister last week by the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), is the Minister aware of the concern felt by Staffordshire parents? Does she know that a leaflet has been circulated by the Staffordshire federation of parent teacher associations outlining the existing discrepancy? It states that Staffordshire primary school pupils receive just £2,151, whereas pupils in Hertfordshire receive £2,370. Moreover, at high school level, Staffordshire children get £2,761, while Hertfordshire children receive £3,029.

Does the Minister understand the frustration felt by Staffordshire parents at that discrepancy, given that Labour promised before the election that it would be rectified in the first year of a Labour Government?

Ms Morris: I have seen the leaflet, as many have ended up on my desk. I understand the frustration that the hon. Gentleman describes, which existed well before the general election. Over 18 years, not only did the previous Conservative Government do nothing to change SSAs, but year on year they cut the money going to Staffordshire.

I do not defend the present SSA structure, which is unfair to some local authorities. Staffordshire is one authority where that unfairness is most evident. We are determined to change the structure for the better, but we need to do so with the consensus of those local authorities that may suffer as a result. If we have not achieved that in one year, it is because that consensus did not exist. However, we are examining the matter and our conclusion will be announced within three years.

The hon. Gentleman knows that, although the SSA has not been changed, the Government have put extra funding into Staffordshire. That extra funding has comprised £6.3 million in extra capital funds and increased SSAs year on year, while almost £2.5 million extra has been given to help with class sizes. I had hoped that the hon. Gentleman might acknowledge the £45,000 that has been made available to schools in his constituency alone. That money has been used to pay for more teachers and to reduce class sizes for the children of his constituents.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I am pleased that the Government are attempting to detoxicate the poisoned chalice of local education authority funding passed on by the previous Administration. Is my right hon. Friend aware that Leicestershire is at the bottom of the shire tables for SSA per school pupil, and that SSA revisions must bridge an £8 million void? We in Leicestershire are happy to be at the top of sporting leagues in cricket, rugby and football, but we are very unhappy to be at the bottom of the funding leagues for health, emergency services and education. Can she offer some hope in that regard to the people of Leicestershire?

Ms Morris: Yes. I am aware that Leicestershire is another of the local authorities that does not do well out of the present SSA formula. However, the House must be aware that I cannot remember an hon. Member standing up and saying that his or her local authority does too well out of the present structure. No one should underestimate the difficulty of changing that structure to make it fairer. However, we are determined to do that, and I will not apologise if the process of getting the structure right takes more than a year.

I repeat the assurance that I gave to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). We are determined to introduce a more robust and fairer system. Meanwhile, we will do everything that we can to continue to honour our pledge of putting more money into local authorities. Leicestershire has received more than £1.5 million in the first year to help with class sizes, and in the form of extra capital. It and other LEAs will share in the increased resources that the Government are putting into education, but I am afraid that the change to the SSA formula will take a year or two longer to implement.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): The next time that the Minister and the Secretary of State meet the Deputy Prime Minister, will they discuss the importance of forward planning? So far, we have had three different settlements for local authorities. In July last year, we had a 6.2 per cent. settlement. In September, it went down to 5.4 per cent. as £150 million was slashed off the budget to pay for performance-related pay. In the settlement a week ago, we suddenly had £50 million put back in. It is difficult for local authorities to plan on that basis. Given that the essence of PRP is consistency, does she realise that many heads, governors and local education

authorities are finding that uncertainty in planning for PRP is causing immense discontent and unrest in our schools?

Ms Morris: What a headline: "Lib Dem complains that Secretary of State puts more money into education". What is life coming to? That is exactly what my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister did last week.

Mr. Willis: He took money away.

Ms Morris: No money was taken away. I and the Deputy Prime Minister have always said that standard spending assessments would increase by 5.4 per cent. and that the money for PRP was on top of that, making 6.1 per cent. None of that has been taken out. What happened last Thursday was that he put a significant amount of money into local authority funding in plenty of time for local authorities to make decisions about the budgets they will announce for schools next year. I would have thought that that more than anything else would have been greatly welcomed by the hon. Gentleman. His reaction is a touch churlish and does him no justice.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): My right hon. Friend will be as delighted as I am to learn that schools in Brent are transferring from the private sector into local authority control. Will she ensure that when such a welcome event happens, corresponding funding is made available in the education SSA? This year, Brent faces a £500,000 shortfall, which would be unfair on children in existing local authority schools. Will she consider that?

Ms Morris: I accept that. As with many such matters, it is a question of timing. Sometimes schools transfer to the maintained sector at a point in the financial cycle when the numbers have already been collected. I would be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about schools transferring to the maintained sector to see whether we can offer more help. I am not aware of the schools or their circumstances, so perhaps a further conversation outside the House would be the best way forward.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Does the Minister not understand—I hope that after the representations that she has heard this morning she will be closer to understanding it—the resentment building up in shire counties such as Staffordshire and Leicestershire as yet again, on eduction funding, the Government say one thing and do another? They say that extra money is going into schools but there is no extra money for the new A-levels. In Northumberland, which received one of the lowest grant increases, a head teacher has warned of A-level classes of more than 30 as a result. The Government promised local authorities that they would fund the teachers' PRP proposals centrally and that all the money would come out of the £1 billion that they claimed had been set aside. Now they are top-slicing money away from local authorities and school budgets. The Government said that school sixth form funding would be guaranteed, yet five months on, they still have not announced what it will be. Today, we learn that teachers and students will have to pay to take their cars into school. Is not that all another part of the great Labour lie? Is it not time that the Minister admitted that this over-bureaucratic and centralising Government are failing to get money where it is needed—into the schools?

Ms Morris: What changes between a Labour and a Conservative Government is that the argument is about how much extra goes to schools, rather than how much is being taken out of schools. That was the form that questions and answers took under the previous Government.

The money for PRP for reforming the teaching profession is exactly as we said it would be; £1 billion is being held centrally, and will be transferred for threshold payments as and when teachers cross the threshold. My right hon. Friend and I said that there would be 5 per cent. extra on the SSA this year; more money will be held centrally by the Government—some out of the SSA and some kept in a separate fund that will be held back. We can argue about whether the figure is 5.4 or 6.1 per cent.; frankly, I am happy to defend either figure—compared to what schools had to put up with, year after year, under the Conservative Administration.

Class Sizes

4. **Ms Claire Ward** (Watford): What progress is being made on the reduction of class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds. [99343]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): We are well on course to deliver our pledge to limit infant class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds to 30 or fewer by September 2001. Recent figures show that the number of children in large infant classes has halved since September 1998, from 354,000 to 181,000 in September 1999. That means that about 300,000 children have benefited from the initiative since January 1998. A total of £620 million has been made available to implement the pledge early in virtually all schools by September 2000.

Ms Ward: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, and congratulate the Government on being on target to reach that limit. Is she aware that, sometimes, many primary schools find it quite difficult to keep to the limit when the appeals process is instigated? Does she agree that the Government should revisit the appeals process to ensure that there is a balance between maintaining the limits—the maximum number on class sizes—and giving each child's case a fair hearing? That would ensure that each child who needs a place at a school is considered. The balance is a difficult one, but does my right hon. Friend feel that the Government should reconsider the issue?

Ms Morris: Perhaps this is a good opportunity to point out that most schools are in the fortunate position of being able to offer more places, because we have provided 12,000 additional places in popular schools. That has done much to increase the exercise of parental preference. However, if the number in a class is to be limited to 30, we must be firm about that. I should be worried if the number were to sneak up one by one, because for every child who is allowed to break the limit, 29 other children are in larger classes. My hon. Friend will be aware that we have now allowed admissions authorities to admit

children above the limit of 30, but only in specified circumstances. I am happy to keep the matter under review, but I am not happy to do what the previous Government did—to turn our back on class size so that the number increases not just to 31 or 32, but to 40 or 45. Neither my hon. Friend, parents nor teachers would want us to do that.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Does the Minister agree that, during the past two years, 1,500 playgroups have closed? What has caused those closures? Does she accept the figures of the Pre-School Learning Alliance, which show that, during next year, a further 1,700 will close?

Ms Morris: The number of playgroups tends to differ from year to year: some open and others close. The hon. Gentleman may want to look up the figures for the number of playgroups that has opened, as well as the number that has closed. He may also be interested to learn that, over the next three years, the Government will double the number of places for three-year-olds, and that 80 per cent. of those new places will be in playgroups.

I am happy to pay tribute to the role of playgroups in early years provision. We said repeatedly that the strength of the playgroups, and the time for them to take advantage of the extra resources, would be during the expansion of places for three-year-olds. That is exactly what has happened. Meanwhile, as the hon. Gentleman will know, we have given playgroups financial support to help them over that difficult transition period. I am sure that they will welcome the efforts that we have made on their behalf.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Although I share the fears expressed, a few moments ago, by my right hon. Friend the Minister about the danger of creeping increases, how do we solve the problem? In a Catholic school in my constituency, the addition of one child would take the class size to 31, so the child is being refused a place and will have to be sent to another school. That is not what the parents or the child want.

Ms Morris: If it is not the 31st child, it is the 35th, the 36th or the 41st. It has never been possible to guarantee that every child will attend the school that their parents choose. By expanding the number of places in popular schools by 12,000, we have ensured that more parents get their first choice. However, at some point we must say, "Enough is enough. We are not prepared to allow this class to become any larger." If we did not do so, we should allow everyone to attend the school that they wanted, regardless of size. I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree that that would be a silly situation.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): It is part of "The Common Sense Revolution" to let admissions rip.

Ms Morris: It is indeed the Opposition's policy.

The situation must be managed carefully. No one should imagine that before the class size pledge, every child attended the school that they wanted, because that was never the case and it will never be possible.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): While the Minister is talking about reducing class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds and selectively collecting information for those ages, as the Government did in September, the same is not true of class sizes for other age groups, as I saw for myself last week in Sheffield, when I visited a class of eight-year-olds with 37 pupils in it at a junior school. Is not the situation especially bad in secondary schools, where there has been an increase of more than 25 per cent. in the number of classes with more than 30 pupils?

While the Minister talks about the 36th and the 40th pupil, is that not a reality now in all too many secondary schools, the number of pupils in classes of more than 36 having doubled under the present Government, and classes of more than 40 now being more common? *[Interruption.]* Yes. Under the present Government, classes of 40 are more common in secondary schools.

Would it not be fair and more accurate for the Government to give the whole picture instead of picking out part of it? Does it not defy common sense to speak about reducing class sizes for children of one age while allowing class sizes for children of other ages to let rip? Is not this, in effect, yet another example of saying one thing and doing another—the great Labour lie?

Ms Morris: I believe that I have just found out why the Opposition's new policy document on education is so thin. They are spending their time scouring the class size list for one statistic that is not moving in the right direction. I am happy to respond to his invitation to make it clear to the House and others exactly what is happening to class sizes.

Class sizes for infant children are down. Average class sizes in primary schools are down. There are 4,000 extra teachers. There are extra classrooms. The pupil-teacher ratio has fallen. Key stage 2 class sizes are steady. *[Interruption.]* Yes, there has been a 50,000 increase year on year. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

In secondary schools, there has been a 0.1 increase in class sizes, but the figures on key stage 1, key stage 2, the pupil-teacher ratio, extra classrooms, extra teachers, early years education and nursery provision are all going the right way. We have achieved that in two years because our priority should be younger children, to give them the best possible start.

Having achieved that record—an incredibly good record to defend—in two years, I can give the hon. Gentleman every assurance that, in due time, we shall also tackle class sizes at key stage 3. We have made a start, but we inherited from the Conservative Government such a mess, with all the statistical trends moving in the wrong direction, that if I have to apologise for not quite having moved on secondary class sizes yet, when we have moved on class sizes in every other bit of the system, I shall apologise.

Child Care

5. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): How many extra child care places were created last year. [99344]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): We created nearly 66,000 new places last year. In the first two years of this Labour Government, we created more new child care places than the previous Conservative Government managed to do in 18 years.

Mr. Dismore: Is my hon. Friend aware that Barnet council has been working closely in partnership with Barnet Play Association, Barnet Pre-School Learning Alliance and the North London training and enterprise council to create a total of almost 1,100 new child care places in my constituency in after-school clubs and summer play schemes? I should especially like to welcome the new child-minding network, which has created 24 places on Grahame Park estate—one of the more deprived parts of my constituency.

We still have quite a long way to go in providing child care places for under-fives. Is my hon. Friend aware of the real need to do more work in that direction?

Ms Hodge: I would like to congratulate Barnet on its achievements so far. A massive expansion in the provision of child care will be achieved only if 150 early years development and child care partnerships deliver it. I am delighted by the hard work, enthusiasm and commitment that the partnerships have shown so far. I am aware of the massive task that we still have to undertake to meet the needs of children and the changing needs of families as we move to the 21st century. Our target to create 1 million new child care places by 2003 is on course and the partnerships are exceeding their targets.

Local Education Authorities

7. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What assessment he has made of the effect on quality of education provided of variations in the level of Government funding to local education authorities. [99346]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): The Government accept that there are valid objections to the variations in the level of Government funding to local education authorities. That is why we are engaged on a fundamental review of this issue and hope to make proposals for changes in due course.

Mr. Kidney: My understanding of the provisional education standard spending assessment settlement for next year is that per pupil the best funded schools will be getting richer at a faster rate than the worst funded schools. Is there an educational justification for widening the gap between the best and worst funded schools?

Ms Morris: No, there is not, which is exactly why we are setting about changing the SSAs. During the period while the SSAs are as they are, the difference in funding to local authorities will reflect changes in demography, the number of children in local authorities and whether they are in the primary or secondary sectors.

I know how strongly my hon. Friend's constituents feel about this matter and I am aware of how much he has done to represent their interests in presenting the case to myself and to my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Deputy Prime Minister. I assure my hon. Friend that we shall move as quickly as we can. Meanwhile, we shall ensure that the other way in which funds are routed into Staffordshire means that his constituents' children will get their fair share of the increased resources. I know that my hon. Friend and many other hon Members will not be satisfied until we change the formula. For all the reasons that I have outlined, it will take one or two more years.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The Minister said a few moments ago that she is proud that the Government took instant action on something that they thought was unfair. Can she understand the frustration when local authorities hear her say that she is seeking consensus? If she is looking for consensus on this matter, she will be looking for a long time. The statement that she has just made—I do not know whether it was a slip or whether it was deliberate—is quite worrying. I believe that the Minister said that she would ensure through other ways that pupils in Staffordshire would get a fair deal. Can that apply also to pupils in Leicestershire and Derbyshire? If she is using a secret formula, can we all know about it, please?

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman fails to understand that SSAs are only one way of routing money to schools. We are increasingly putting more money through the standards fund, and £1.6 billion went through it this year. The assurance that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) is one that I am happy to give to the hon. Gentleman. The extra money that will be distributed will not be under the SSA formula. Schools will not lose out because that is their formula for adjustment. It is not a secret formula but an open one to ensure that the extra money that we are putting into schools through the standards fund means that everyone can benefit.

The hon. Gentleman must realise that under this Government we have seen an increase in funding over the past two years of £200 per pupil, compared with a drop in funding for primary pupils of £30 and one of £80 for secondary age students under the Conservative Government. We shall change the formula in due course. Meanwhile, every school in the hon. Gentleman's constituency is getting more money through both the SSA and the standards fund than they did at any time during the years of the previous Government.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Is it not at least welcome to hear Conservatives now claiming that class sizes have some significance in the quality of education, when for many years they denied that that was the case? Is my hon. Friend aware that shortly after I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State entered Parliament, I asked the then Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher, if she would compliment Derbyshire county council on having the smallest class sizes in the country? It was the Local Government Act 1988 and the introduction of standard spending assessments that destroyed those class sizes and made them among the largest in the country.

In Derbyshire, we are very pleased with the moves on funding that have been made by the Department for Education and Employment. However, our problem is with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and with the standard spending assessment.

It has not been adjusted, and we shall have to wait a long time before alterations are made in new legislation that will finally get rid of existing measures. Does a brick wall exist between the DFEE and DETR?

Ms Morris: No brick wall exists between those Departments or any other Departments in Whitehall. I am sure that my hon. Friend will lobby DETR as much as he lobbies the DFEE, and I wish him well if he does. I am delighted that Derbyshire has made such good progress on class sizes. We were very pleased that in the first year that we delivered the pledge on class sizes—if my memory serves me well—Derbyshire received more money to deliver smaller classes than any other local authority. I think that it received £1 million in the first year and it received at least as much, if not more, in the second year. I am so pleased that infant children in my hon. Friend's constituency will now start their schooling in classes of 30 or fewer, giving them a real chance to get a firm foundation. I wish them well, and I wish the local authority well in delivering the rest of the class size pledge.

Grammar Schools

8. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): How many *(a)* challenges and *(b)* queries he has received regarding grammar school petitions. [99348]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): Since consultation began on the grammar school ballot regulations arising out of the White Paper "Excellence in Schools" in July 1997, we have received 2,300 queries regarding the grammar school petition and ballot process, 16 of which have been complaints about campaigning material in areas where petitions are currently being circulated.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that response. He will recall that, during the passage of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998, Ministers were keen to stress that it would be a breach of the regulations for local authorities, schools or governing bodies to publish information or express views that were intended to influence parents during the ballot process.

Nearly two months ago, I wrote to the Secretary of State highlighting a very clear breach by the head of Trinity school in Hulme. There has still been no concrete action taken to uphold the Government's own regulations. That is now resulting in the process in the borough of Trafford descending into farce. The so-called cabinet member for education in Trafford, Councillor Peter Mitchell, has expressed the view publicly in the local press that the 11-plus is resulting in "social selection" and "economic apartheid" in our schools. When will the Secretary of State enforce his own regulations and ensure that there is a fair contest?

Mr. Blunkett: As the hon. Gentleman knows, because he has asked eight oral questions on this issue, we are taking decisive action. We are investigating the complaint about that school, as we did the complaint relating to the material put out by Urmston grammar school. That complaint was resolved this week by taking action to ensure that that material was withdrawn as it was inadequate and inappropriate and broke the regulations. We will take action, case by case, if complaints are made about the conduct of either secondary modern schools or grammar schools and if they are made by the Conservative party or by anyone else. We shall do that fairly and openly for the sake of the children and their futures.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that there are very fair procedures in place to ensure that parents decide such issues in local ballots? Does he agree that the Conservative party's obsession with this issue, which affects a small percentage of children in the country, is very revealing and shows that it is still concerned with that minority agenda instead of with raising standards for every child in every school in every part of the country?

Mr. Blunkett: Yes.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman's reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) was grossly unsatisfactory and exudes the sort of complacency for which the right hon. Gentleman has fast become renowned. Given the extraordinary behaviour of the head teacher of Trinity Church of England school in Hulme, Manchester, Mr. Michael Evans, in sending out anti-grammar school propaganda to Trafford parents, and the further abuse, which was rightly highlighted by my hon. Friend, of Labour councillor, Peter Mitchell, in indulging in ludicrous hyperbole that accused grammar schools of being responsible for economic apartheid in that area, will the right hon. Gentleman now stop dithering and use the powers available to him under sub-paragraph (e) of paragraph 15 on page 10, lines 8 to 11, of the Education (Grammar Schools Ballots) Regulations 1998 to declare that this year the petition process in Trafford is null and void? Does not the Secretary of State understand that if he will not do so, people will rightly conclude that he is working hand in glove with left-wing educational vandals, who are plotting to destroy some of the finest state schools in the country?

Mr. Blunkett: Knowing the particular line or paragraph of a regulation does not make one intelligent or right. Again, I make it clear to the House that when complaints are made, they will be investigated and, if they are upheld, dealt with. That will be the case for complaints from either side in the discussion about the future of selection.

The hon. Gentleman was recently quoted in the press as saying that some of my honourable colleagues in the Labour party whose children went to selective schools were exercising their right to choose such schools. I point out to him that where selection exists, parents do not have a right to choose because the pupils are chosen by an 11-plus examination that excludes 75 to 80 per cent. of the children and their parents from any right of entry to those excellent schools.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that once a ballot has taken place, he will expect the results to be complied with? Is that not in contrast to the behaviour of Conservative-controlled Buckinghamshire county council, which under the previous Conservative Government three

times ignored the result of ballots in Milton Keynes, where the majority of parents expressed their opposition to the creation of a grammar school? Yet right up until the general election, the previous Government and Buckinghamshire county council tried to impose a grammar school on Milton Keynes in opposition to the clearly expressed views of its people.

Mr. Blunkett: That is why the artificial indignation of Conservative Members takes the biscuit, because they will do one thing to protect their own and quite another to protect the rest of the population.

Special Educational Needs

9. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): If he will make a statement on his plans to integrate pupils with special educational needs into mainstream schools. [99349]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): "Meeting Special Educational Needs: A programme of action", which was published in November 1998 following extensive consultation, sets out our strategy for promoting the inclusion, within mainstream schools, of pupils with special educational needs where their parents want that and appropriate support can be provided.

Mr. Robertson: I thank the Minister for that reply, but does she accept that some local authorities are going too far and trying to include in mainstream schools all children with moderate learning difficulties—a term that under-describes the problems of many children? Does she further accept that not all children with special needs can be integrated and that each child should be treated as an individual? Will she join me in condemning those local authorities that are trying to close special schools in their area?

Jacqui Smith: I know that the hon. Gentleman has taken a close interest in developments in the Gloucestershire special educational needs review. However, I am sure that he will agree that specific proposals for local provision should be a decision for local education authorities, and that if any proposals for closure are made, they should go through the statutory procedures, including being referred to the school organisation committee, which will of course include specialist school representatives.

I am, however, happy to say that our approach to inclusion has been practical and not dogmatic, and I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the key objective of all our policies for children with special educational needs must be to safeguard the interests of all children. If parents want a mainstream setting for their child, our policy is to try to provide that, but, equally, if more specialist provision is sought, it is important and right that parents' wishes are respected.

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): As a special needs teacher of 20 years, I particularly welcome the Government's policy of inclusion for children with special needs. However, is my hon. Friend aware of the problems facing secondary schools in the Forest of Dean in providing the necessary support for children with mild emotional and behavioural difficulties or moderate learning difficulties? Does she agree that the skills and expertise of teachers at the area's special schools, such as Dean Hall and Alderman Knight, should be kept and used, and that, if need be, we should find methods of deploying their skills and expertise to support the mainstream schools?

Jacqui Smith: Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I agree that it is important that the expertise that clearly exists in our special schools is brought to bear also on improving standards in our mainstream schools. That is why, for example, my Department has brought together in a group representatives from around the country to consider how we can develop that work, so that we get the most out of our mainstream schools and use the undoubted expertise in our special schools to improve standards for all children.

Bett Report

10. **Dr. Evan Harris** (Oxford, West and Abingdon): What representations he has received from higher education bodies and institutions on implementation of the recommendations of the Bett report. [99350]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): My Department has received several representations from higher education bodies, institutions and individuals. However, I should emphasise that the Bett committee was established by and reported to the higher education employers. It was not a Government committee, and it is for the employers to consider the committee's recommendations.

Dr. Harris: Is the Minister aware of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals' analysis, confirmed by the House of Commons Library, which shows a continued reduction—1.1 per cent. this year, more than last year—in the funding per student per year in higher education? That is projected to continue for the remaining years of this Parliament, despite the income obtained from the discredited and tawdry policy of charging students tuition fees. Students will be paying more and getting less funding per student under this Government. Is the Minister aware that the CVCP does not believe that that can be sustained without damaging the quality of education in universities?

On the Bett report, does the Minister at least accept that he has a responsibility for the fair treatment of women lecturers, who are shown to require additional resources for fair treatment and fair pay?

Mr. Wicks: We of course support the principle and the practice of fair pay, regardless of gender.

On funding, the policy of tuition fees enables more money—I stress that—to be invested in our universities. The funding of universities by the Government is impressive. In 2001-02, higher education will receive an extra £295 million, compared with the preceding year. That is a cash increase of 5.4 per cent. and comes on top of the £253 million extra the year before, and £318 million the year before that. It is the job of Government and the Department to invest in

higher education. It is not our job to set individual pay rates. If we had that power, we would be accused of being control freaks, and we would not want that, would we?

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, South): Does my hon. Friend agree that outside our top universities, nobody who is any good lectures full-time in information technology, computer studies, accountancy or law? If such people are any good, they can get two, three, four or more times more money in the commercial world. I urge my hon. Friend to reject categorically the approach of the Bett committee report, which wants the Government to stump up more cash to pay university lecturers more. Will my hon. Friend urge the universities to look instead to the private sector for a solution?

Mr. Wicks: I do not accept the proposition that everyone teaching in those disciplines is second-rate. Many people are motivated to serve in our universities and teach young people because teaching is their vocation. Not everyone is motivated by money. However, there are some problems in some disciplines, and some universities may want to find out whether some employees of accountancy and IT firms want to teach on a part-time basis. That is one possible approach in future in this difficult area.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): The Government have consistently washed their hands of the Bett report, and the Minister has done so again this morning, but does he not understand that universities are getting fed up with the Government's failure to tackle the issue of university funding?

The Government said—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Carry on.

Mrs. May: I intend to.

The Government said, and the Minister has repeated it this morning, that introducing tuition fees would mean more money for further and higher education, but, under this Government, funding for higher education has gone down by £135 per student—yet another example of the Government saying one thing and doing another. Perhaps, given that, it is little wonder that drop-out rates are rising.

The Government charge tuition fees and then take the money away from the universities by the back door, giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Will the Minister confirm that next year £80 million of tuition fee money will be taken away from the universities? When will he scrap the glitzy press releases and come clean on the Government's failure to deliver on their promises on higher education funding?

Mr. Wicks: I cannot accept any of that. The Government are investing more each and every year in higher education. We grasped the nettle of tuition fees so that more money could be invested. With all due respect to the hon. Lady, she should examine her Administration's record when, between 1989 and 1997, unit funding—*[Interruption.]* You may not want to hear this, but I shall tell you—not you, Madam Speaker, although you may be interested as well, but the hon. Lady who has a specific interest in this. Between 1989 and 1997, unit funding fell by 36 per cent. That was the hon. Lady's record. We are investing more in higher education and maintaining standards.

Equal Pay

11. **Maria Eagle** (Liverpool, Garston): What discussions he has had with the Equal Opportunities Commission on equal pay for women. [99351]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): Since my appointment six weeks ago, I have met Julie Mellor, the chair of the EOC, and I was delighted to take part in the launch of the EOC's valuing women campaign on 26 October. That campaign will complement the cross-Government action being taken under the auspices of the women's unit and the DFEE to tackle the range of factors that gives rise to the pay gap. I will be in regular contact with the EOC to review progress.

Maria Eagle: Does my right hon. Friend agree that toleration of continuing pay inequality will perpetuate unfairness into the future, particularly in respect of its impact on women's pensions? If we do not get the matter right now, 20 or 30 years hence, women will be retiring into income inequality.

Ms Jowell: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, who has also touched on the important point that the pay gap is due to a range of factors, and the likelihood of a pay gap is often established early on when girls make career choices as little more than teenagers. That is why we shall be considering the range of measures that need to be taken across Government, working with business, the careers service, schools and young people themselves, to address what is unacceptable and unfair.

Older Workers

12. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): What assessment he has made of barriers to employment, including age discrimination, facing older workers. [99352]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): The Government continue to assess the employment barriers facing older workers. We now publish annual key indicators and we are assessing rigorously the impact of the code of practice on age diversity. We are also assessing the pathfinder pilots on the new deal for 50-plus and the new deal for disabled people. In December 1998, the Prime Minister asked the performance and innovation unit in the Cabinet Office to undertake an assessment of the full impact of the trend towards economic inactivity among older people. The project findings will be published in the new year.

Dr. Cable: Does the Minister agree that age discrimination is pervasive and extremely damaging to individuals and the economy as a whole, and, if so, do the Government have any plans to legislate to outlaw it? What plans do they have to improve practice within the public sector, which they directly control, to avoid the kind of situation that affects one of my constituents, who is desperate to work because he has no pension entitlement,

who is fighting fit as he is a former world boxing champion, who applied to the Post Office for a job as a postman, of which we are desperately short, and who was told that because he was 59 he was too old and there were no circumstances under which he could be hired?

Ms Hodge: I certainly agree that discrimination against older workers is damaging to them and the economy, and that we cannot take unfair advantage of older people's long service and experience. On legislative intervention, the Prime Minister gave an undertaking to review the effectiveness of our code on age discrimination. I stress to the hon. Gentleman that experience elsewhere leaves us with some questions. For example, fewer older workers participate in the work forces of Spain and Canada, which have legislated against age discrimination, than in that of the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom's record places it third in Europe, after Denmark and Sweden. All three countries have no legislation on the subject.

On the point about the public sector showing an example, we are doing that through the new deal for 50-plus and the new deal for disabled people, of whom 50 per cent. are over 50. Government Departments are re-examining their retirement age, and I am delighted that someone in my private office has been given the cheerful news that she can remain there after the age of 60.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Does my hon. Friend agree that, rather than legislating, we should take a lead in highlighting the fact that many talented people in their 50s and 60s, who have an excellent education, skills and enormous experience, should use that talent in many jobs, including in education? Does my hon. Friend agree that our employment policies have led to skill shortages and that we need those talented older people to fill jobs?

Ms Hodge: As my hon. Friend was my contemporary at university, he is in the over-50 age group. I am delighted that the House has had the common sense to use him by appointing him to the chair of the Education Sub-Committee. I welcome him to that post. I agree with him entirely that experience, talent and a long record in work is crucial to ensure economic prosperity and to take advantage of individuals' great skills.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): But when the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), who is now Minister of State, Cabinet Office, was in opposition, he made it clear that a Labour Government would legislate on the subject. Can the Minister tell the House why the Government have resiled from that commitment?

Ms Hodge: I can inform the hon. Gentleman that we have published a code on age diversity. We rigorously monitor the code, and the Prime Minister has given a commitment to the House that if the code does not operate effectively, we will consider legislation.

Child Care

13. **Mrs. Anne Campbell** (Cambridge): What progress has been made in delivering child care information to parents. [R] [99353]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): Building on the innovative work of my hon. Friend, excellent progress has been made to improve parents' access to good quality child care information. All early years development and child care partnerships are developing local children's information services that meet minimum service standards. Yesterday, I launched ChildcareLink, a freephone national child care information line and child care website.

Mrs. Campbell: As the unremunerated chair of opportunity links, I have a relevant registered interest in the provision of child care information. Does my hon. Friend agree that easily accessible information on child care is vital to help parents to return to work? Does she also agree that information must be accurate, timely and bang up to the minute in order to be effective?

Ms Hodge: I agree entirely that information is crucial, and I was delighted when I recently visited a site in a supermarket to discover that 200 hits a day were made by people matching their child care needs to child care places. We are funding local authorities generously to ensure that they can keep their information networks up to date. This year, that funding has increased by 150 per cent. We are considering the further assistance that we can provide to monitor and support partnerships and thus ensure that their information is up to date.

Class Sizes

14. **Mrs. Jacqui Lait** (Beckenham): If he will make a statement on the impact of the Government's class size pledge on *(a)* capital expenditure on school buildings and *(b)* the provision of teachers. [99354]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): So far, our class size pledge has resulted in the allocation of capital funding of more than £122 million to build 1,700 extra infant classrooms and revenue funding of more than £100.5 million to recruit 4,600 extra infant teachers. In total, £620 million is available for additional classrooms and teachers to reduce infant class sizes.

Mrs. Lait: I thank the Minister for that reply. Is she aware that a primary school in Beckenham has had to double its planned size because of the effect of the 30-pupil limit? Can she guarantee that the capital funding required for that school will be provided without affecting the capital funding required for other primary schools also to meet the 30 limit? Can she also guarantee that sufficient teachers will be available when that school comes on-stream in two years' time?

Ms Morris: Yes, I am happy to give the hon. Lady those guarantees if that is the plan that has been approved and agreed between the Department and the local authority—I do not have it in front of me. We have always said that we shall provide both the capital and the revenue separate from other funding that goes to local authorities. That is yet another example of the Government putting money into raising standards for children, and I am pleased that the hon. Lady welcomes the doubling of places at what I assume is a popular school in her constituency.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 6 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Government Resources and Accounts Bill.

TUESDAY 7 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Freedom of Information Bill.

WEDNESDAY 8 DECEMBER—Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate entitled "Cuts in Tube Investment, Ways of Paying for more Tube Investment and the General Transport Budget", followed by a debate entitled "Coalition Discussions between the Government and the Liberal Democrat Party". Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

Motion relating to the Postal Privilege (Suspension) Order.

THURSDAY 9 DECEMBER—Debate on the World Trade Organisation Millennium Round on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 10 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 13 DECEMBER—Until 7pm, debate on the Common Fisheries Policy on a Government motion, followed by a motion on the Christmas recess Adjournment debate.

TUESDAY 14 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Prevention of Terrorism Bill.

WEDNESDAY 15 DECEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the Representation of the People Bill [1st Day].

THURSDAY 16 DECEMBER—Estimates Day [1st Allotted Day].

There will be a debate on aviation safety, followed by a debate on inward and outward investment in Scotland. Details will be given in the *Official Report*. At 7pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates. That will be followed by proceedings on the Consolidated Fund Bill.

FRIDAY 17 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The House may also be asked to consider any Lords messages that may be received.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful for the next week's business and an indication of the business for the following week.

I welcome the announcement that the Representation of the People Bill is to be taken on the Floor of the House, in response to the matter being raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) last week, but remain concerned at the continued absence of a debate in Government time on economic matters. I raised that omission a fortnight ago and my hon. Friend raised it last week. He was told that the Government were "looking anxiously for an outcome to those discussions."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 757.] Nothing has been said today to allay those anxieties, and we still have not had the normal two-day autumn defence debate. Does not the failure of the Government so far to find time for those debates on the economy and defence show that the role of the House in holding them to account is already being undermined by the large number of Bills that they have decided to introduce?

Yesterday, the Chancellor announced new joint action committees to link England with Scotland and Wales. The House has yet to have a proper debate on the concordats published in October. Can the right hon. Lady find time for a debate on those two important aspects of devolution?

Can the Leader of the House confirm that the next millennium bug statement will be oral? Does she plan to make a statement in the new year telling us how things went, assuming that we all make it back here?

Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Deputy Prime Minister will reply to the first debate on Wednesday, to deal with the mounting criticism of his performance? As for the second debate, on coalition, which is of interest to all three major parties, is it not clear that only one Minister knows what is going on? Can the right hon. Lady assure us that the Prime Minister will respond to that debate?

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming the news that the Committee stage of the Representation of the People Bill will be taken on the Floor of the House. As he said, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) raised the matter last week, and the Government have agreed to the request.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me for a debate on economic matters in Government time. I am conscious that such a debate is outstanding, but the right hon. Gentleman will have observed that I have not announced all the business before we rise for the Christmas recess.

Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman, especially in view of his final remarks—although I recognise that he asked perfectly reasonably for a debate in Government time—that, if the Opposition are so anxious to discuss the economy, their wish to waste half a day discussing some mythical coalition suggests rather a strange order of priorities.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the defence debate. He knows, because I have said it before, that the Government have every intention of providing a proper two-day debate. He also knows not only that we have made it plain for some time that the defence White Paper has unfortunately been delayed, but that the White Paper must then go to the Select Committee on Defence, because that is part of the House's scrutinising role.

The right hon. Gentleman shakes his head. The White Paper does not have to go to the Select Committee but, if he talks of the undermining of the House's role while simultaneously suggesting that we should forget the Select Committee, I can only say that it is not we who are undermining the role of the House in engaging in proper scrutiny. We will have those debates when we can present the White Paper, and when the Committee has had a chance to look at it.

I note the right hon. Gentleman's request for a debate on the concordats, although there have been a number of debates on devolution issues. I can confirm that I expect the next millennium bug statement to be oral, because it will be the last before the date change.

I am perfectly prepared to consider making a statement in the new year. I note what the right hon. Gentleman said about the possibility that not everyone would "make it back"; I could give him a small list of the people whom we could do without, but it might get longer as scrutiny of it continued.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me who would respond to the Opposition day debates. He will appreciate that we have only just received notice of the debates that the Opposition intend to schedule. I can only say that the appropriate Ministers, representing the relevant Departments, will take part. I fear that I cannot undertake to provide the Prime Minister for the second half of the Opposition day, as he has much better things to do with his time than to respond to a rather frivolous debate based on frivolous newspaper reports.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Does my right hon. Friend agree that some of the most distressing complaints brought to our constituency surgeries concern medical cases in which people feel that their health has been more damaged than helped by interventions on their behalf? Some such complaints were the subject of a Channel 4 news programme broadcast in July 1998, and our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health was quick to commission an independent review of the allegations that were made. I am pleased to say that the report resulting from that review is published today, and I hope that Derriford hospital in Plymouth will act equally swiftly on its recommendations.

A report by the Select Committee on Health also deals with such matters of concern. Would my right hon. Friend arrange an early debate, so that we can examine the way in which complaints are handled in the health service, and can ensure that they are dealt with as swiftly and seriously as we would all wish them to be?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right to say that people's concerns about the impact and effect of medical intervention can be some of the most distressing cases that Members have to deal with. Obviously, people hope for a successful outcome in all their dealings with the health service and will be particularly disappointed and distressed if they feel that that is not the case. I am grateful to her for drawing to our attention the recent publication of the two reports. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate in the near future, but if, say, the Liaison Committee were to select the Health Committee report for debate, either in the Chamber, or in Westminster Hall, that would give an opportunity for those issues to be raised.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I warmly endorse the request from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) not only from a constituency point of view—my constituents also use the hospital to which she referred—but because much wider national issues are involved, as I am sure that the Leader of the House recognises.

Can we have a debate, if not before the Christmas recess, soon after, on the resources available to the House of Commons Library? Did she notice in Prime Minister's questions last week that, in answer both to the leader of the Conservative party at column 610 and to my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) at column 612, when faced with facts that were made available by the House of Commons Library, the Prime Minister said that those facts were "simply wrong"?

In my experience and, I am sure, in that of the Leader of the House, the House of Commons Library provides an excellent service to all hon. Members. It is the first time, at least in recent history, that any Prime Minister has cast aspersions on the validity of such facts—at least since Baroness Thatcher, who used to take the view that she did not want to be confused with the facts. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an early debate on the way in which we are served by the House of Commons Library?

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for recognising the worth of the observations of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) and the degree to which there is common ground on the matter across the House.

Of course I noticed what the Prime Minister said. Naturally, I hang on his every word at Prime Minister's Question Time.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): We all do.

Mrs. Beckett: As we all do. I entirely share, as I know the Prime Minister does, the view of the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) that the Library provides an excellent service. Equally, however, the hon. Gentleman will know that the Library would dissociate itself from having any responsibility for what statistics are sought and how they are used.

I cannot promise an early debate on resources for the Library, but the hon. Gentleman might ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) a question on the matter when House of Commons Commission questions come up next.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): My right hon. Friend will know that, despite strenuous opposition from some Members in the past century, ways were found for Catholics, Jews and non-believers to take their seats without in any way undermining their religious, or non-religious, principles. Will she consider the possibility of a change of wording that would allow Sinn Fein MPs to take their seats? After all, they were elected in the same way as we were. If the peace process is to continue and, as we hope, to be consolidated, will that not be an encouraging sign of our own flexibility as a parliamentary democracy? Of course, we would need to work on the basis that there is a genuine wish on the part of the people to whom I have referred to take their seats.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend raises an interesting and important point. He is right to say that the House has, historically, found ways to enable people to be at ease with their conscience and to operate properly as Members of Parliament. I am not entirely sure who the issue that he has raised would be a matter for, but I will draw it to the attention of my relevant right hon. and hon. Friends. However, I share his view that, before the matter could even be considered, there would have to be a genuine wish to operate properly as Members of Parliament and in the context of the development of peace.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Has the Leader of the House been struck

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

by the irony of the fact that, on Tuesday, we shall debate the Second Reading of the Freedom of Information Bill and, at 7 o'clock the following evening, we shall be talking about a matter so arcane that only two members of the Government could be informed about it?

Mrs. Beckett: It is important that we are to have a debate on the Freedom of Information Bill, which will, for the first time, give a statutory right of freedom to receive information. I take no responsibility for the other debate to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. It is the choice of his right hon. and hon. Friends.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I am grateful that the Leader of the House has found time for us to debate aviation safety, which is essential, particularly in the run-up to the millennium. Will she also find time to debate the role of Railtrack—a company at the centre of the railway system? A report issued today shows that changes in the management and the culture of the company are long overdue. It might be a good idea to look carefully at the role of a private company at the centre of one of our most essential services.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her welcome for the debate on aviation safety. I understand her interest in, and concern about, the role of Railtrack. The Transport Sub-Committee, which she chairs, has done a great deal of worthwhile work on those issues. I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for a special debate just on Railtrack, but she will know that the Transport Bill has been published and will offer opportunities for such concerns to be raised. I shall bear her further remarks in mind.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): The right hon. Lady has had on her desk since she took office the fourth report of the Select Committee on Procedure about delegated legislation, which was published three years ago. As the present Procedure Committee is also considering the issue, would it not be helpful if the Government were to respond to the report, or at least arrange a debate on it, so that the current Committee can have the views of the House as it proceeds? We are debating modernisation. With more than 1,700 pieces of legislation going forward every year, often unconsidered by the House, it is an essential matter for debate.

Mrs. Beckett: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have found time to debate a number of Procedure Committee reports of late. He says that at least we should have a debate on the report that he referred to, but as he was, if I recall correctly, one of the principal movers behind the establishment of the sittings in Westminster Hall, he is as aware as anybody of how tight time is for debates. I shall bear his remarks in mind, but, given that discussions are in train, I am not sure whether I fully accept his view that now, rather than when the discussions are further advanced, is the time for us to have a debate.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Given the welcome developments in Northern Ireland, what does my right hon. Friend see as the scope of Northern Ireland business in the House in future? We have the Northern Ireland Grand Committee, the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs and Northern Ireland questions. Has she had any indication that the Ulster Unionists might be willing to take their seats on the British-Irish parliamentary body?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. There may be issues in the aftermath of developments in the peace process that the House will need to discuss, although I cannot anticipate what they will be. I have not had any indication of what changes are intended for the membership of the various bodies, perhaps because people have been more engaged in dealing with the aftermath of the re-establishment at Stormont. I shall draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, but I fear that I cannot give him the information that he seeks today.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Leader of the House knows that there have been some unfounded concerns about aviation with the millennium coming on. Would it be possible to have a debate when we come back—if we cannot have it before then—on the open skies policy? The Government might be impeding some of our people from reducing transatlantic fares and allowing people to travel with more speed and freedom.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right, and I am grateful to him for saying that some of the stories that have appeared have been unfounded. I recognise his ingenuity in linking that to the open skies policy. However, I fear that, at this stage of the Session and with legislation to get under way, I see little prospect of finding time for a specific debate on the open skies policy, although I recognise its importance.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): Will my right hon. Friend make time available for an early debate on housing? The House will be aware of the developing housing and homelessness crisis in Greater London, where more than 38,000 people are now in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation and considerable numbers are sleeping rough on the streets. The problems and concerns in other parts of the country are more about declining estates and empty properties. The Conservative party has expressed collective nimbyism about the building of new homes in the south-east, where there is a great demand and need for affordable accommodation, and those issues should be aired. We are to have a Green Paper in the next few months, and Parliament should express some views before then.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns about the continued aftermath of the difficulties and deficiencies in housing policy that we inherited from the Conservative party. He will know that the Government are seeking to turn that around. However, he will know also that the provision of sound housing takes time. Previous Governments of all political shades have sometimes regretted a great rush to throw up housing in the short term. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the issue in the near future, but my hon. Friend may like to bear in mind the opportunities that arise in Westminster Hall, and seek a debate in that forum.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Could the right hon. Lady induce the Deputy Prime Minister to put

right his dereliction of duty in not coming to the House to present a statement on the withdrawal of his proposal that Railtrack should assume responsibility for the modernisation of the sub-surface lines—the District, Circle and Metropolitan lines—of London Underground? Would it not be better—even at this late hour—if, in advance of Wednesday's debate on cuts in London Underground, he came to the House to provide the background for that debate, and to allay our suspicions that his decision had more to do with buying off the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) than with providing an effective strategy for the modernisation of the tube?

Mrs. Beckett: It is unusual for someone to want a statement even before a debate, and I fear that I cannot satisfy the hon. Gentleman in that regard. He talked about the withdrawal of a role for Railtrack. In fact, the Deputy Prime Minister has announced that Railtrack will not be charged with sole responsibility because it has been unable to confirm that it could do so on the basis of an integrated system. My right hon. Friend has made it plain that that was the basis of any possibility of Railtrack being given the sole role. That was announced in June. In consequence, I see no need for a statement to confirm what my right hon. Friend said was the framework of the negotiations then.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the extreme frustration of many of my constituents in Norfolk about the fact that they are having to watch Yorkshire and north English television regionally. Last week, the Minister responsible for broadcasting came to Norfolk. Although supportive of the need to address the problem, she had to relay the information that the next major legislation on broadcasting is not likely to be until the next Parliament. In those circumstances, and given the good will expressed by Ministers—and the fact that I must be one of 30 or 40 hon. Members with constituents in this position—is there any chance that the Government will be willing to give a fair wind and some time to a private Member's Bill specifically addressing this issue?

Mrs. Beckett: I have great sympathy with the concern that my hon. Friend expresses, and I know that it is a cause of great resentment in the areas the he and other hon. Members represent that that choice is denied. However, I am not sure that I share my hon. Friend's confidence that legislation would be the best way to tackle the problem, still less that the best solution would be a private Member's Bill. However, I have no doubt that my hon. Friend will exercise his persuasive powers on those hon. Members who won a place in the ballot for private Member's Bills. I wish him well with his efforts, but I cannot undertake to provide the support that he seeks.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May we have a focused debate on the relationship between the Prime Minister, Mr. Prodi—the Prime Minister's friend and a man whom he admires—and the Prime Minister's crony, Lord Simon of Highbury, to explore the nature of the relationship between them, especially their views on Europe and its future, and the national veto in the European Union? The Prime Minister may agree with his crony and his friend, or he may not, but the issue is vital for the future of this country and its relationship with the European Union. We need an urgent debate to get to the bottom of the problem and find out whether the Prime Minister is a good European or whether he has already—although I can hardly believe it—fallen out with his friend, Mr. Prodi, and taken a different view.

Mrs. Beckett: I point out to the right hon. Gentleman that we had a debate on Europe yesterday, so it seems strange for him to call for an urgent debate today on the same European matters. He will be mindful of the fact that no Labour Government have ever given up any element of the British veto, because that was done by the Conservative Government under Baroness Thatcher. The right hon. Gentleman should perhaps focus on the rethinking that seems to be happening in the Conservative party.

I find it offensive that a senior, distinguished and internationally recognised British businessman should be dismissed and sneered at in the way that the right hon. Gentleman did by describing him as "a crony" of the Prime Minister. Every time that the right hon. Gentleman and people like him make such remarks, people in the City wonder more and more about the direction of the Conservative party.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Could my right hon. Friend find Government time to debate the role, function and effectiveness of local health authorities? The Leicestershire health authority, in an acute hospital review in the county of Leicestershire, has concluded that the almost new Glenfield hospital—a lung cancer centre of county importance; a breast care centre of regional importance, with a unit recently opened by the previous Secretary of State for Health; and a cardiology unit of national importance—is imperilled by its downgrading in status to a planned care and rehabilitation unit, which is a concept not yet known in the United Kingdom. We need to review that issue, which is of great concern to 1 million people in the county of Leicestershire.

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware of the reputation of the Glenfield hospital, which I visited as shadow Secretary of State for Health. I understand the concerns that my hon. Friend expresses, although I am sure that he accepts that there has never been a proposal to change, reform or close a hospital anywhere in the United Kingdom that has not caused great anxiety and concern locally, because people are naturally and properly attached to their local hospitals. I am afraid that I cannot find time for a special debate on the matter in the near future, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is in his place and will have noted my hon. Friend's remarks.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): May I add my voice to the calls from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) for a debate on the report published today, "Thoracic Surgery Services within the Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust"? Several questions were not asked and several answers were not published in the report. It is imperative that there is public confidence in health services, and those questions and answers need to be heard in this House, which is the appropriate forum.

Mrs. Beckett: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, and it is clear that there is considerable interest across the

[Mrs. Beckett]

House in the issues that the report has raised, although, as it was published only today, it is too early to respond. However, the issue is a good example of one on which hon. Members with a common interest might get together to request a debate—perhaps in Westminster Hall—to air the issues of concern across the locality.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The right hon. Lady will recall—probably with some horror—that she was kind enough to tell me last week that she could think of nothing that she would enjoy more than to take part in a debate on pensions policy. With Christmas coming along, may I urge her to indulge herself and arrange for such a debate next week, so that the House can discuss at some length issues such as the scrapping of the married couples allowance and of dividend tax credits, and the abolition of home income plans, of the widow's bereavement allowance and of medical insurance tax? We could also debate the £5 billion a year in increased taxation that has been imposed on pension funds. Would not the Leader of the House admit that her instincts were basically sound and that we should have a debate next week on all the many ways in which her Government have betrayed middle-class pensioners?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman probably understood that, although I said how much I would enjoy taking part in such a debate, my role will prevent that. Although it remains my view that I would enjoy taking part in that debate—as I would then be able to wrap the record of the previous Conservative Government around the necks of the hon. Gentleman and of other Conservative Members—I fear that that is an indulgence that I must deny myself, even at Christmas.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): In Committee Room 9 this morning, we had the opportunity to debate the Government's change of policy with respect to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The Government now require the institute to consider the affordability as well as the clinical effectiveness of procedures. Is that not such an important change in policy that the right hon. Lady should give the whole House the opportunity to indulge in debate on that matter?

Mrs. Beckett: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman, who makes the mistake of assuming that what the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) said during Prime Minister's questions yesterday was accurate. However, I fear that his confidence is misplaced. The Government have not changed policy and the consultation document issued in July 1998 entitled "A First Class Service—Quality in the New NHS" stated that the institute would promote

"clinical and cost-effectiveness through guidance and audit, to support frontline staff."

There has therefore been no change in policy.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Is the Leader of the House aware of the disturbing incident in the Chamber on the night of 9 November, when my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) was allegedly threatened with physical violence by a junior Government Whip? I do not think it fair to name the Whip in question, but the episode was seen by the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George), who I understand is willing to come forward as a witness.

Will the right hon. Lady find time for the Government Chief Whip to make a statement to the House about the investigations that have been undertaken into the formal complaint submitted by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot? Although a long time has passed since that deplorable incident, the Chief Whip has not seen fit either to acknowledge that it took place, or to reply to my hon. Friend.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that hon. Gentleman merely confirms that my ear for gossip is much worse that I feared, as I was not aware of any such incident. Although Chief Whips do not make statements to the House, I shall draw his remarks to my right hon. Friend's attention. It is always regrettable when relationships between hon. Members deteriorate. However, may I gently suggest to the hon. Gentleman that I am not sure that those relationships are improved by raising such matters on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): In her reply to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), the Leader of the House highlighted the confusion in the minds of both the Government and the public over whether cost-effectiveness will be taken into account in deciding whether people can have certain treatments or drugs. Is it not in the public interest that there be a statement—or better still a full debate—on the matter? Did not what the Prime Minister said yesterday to my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) about the cost-effectiveness of drugs amount to an admission that drugs will be rationed and that some people will get them if there is money available, and that others, regardless of their clinical need, will not?

Mrs. Beckett: It is an interesting phenomenon in politics, of which this is a classic example, that sometimes someone says something and someone else hears something completely different. I am at a loss to understand how the hon. Gentleman can read confusion in the Government into my identification of the fact that what was said in a document published in July 1998 is exactly what the Prime Minister said yesterday. If there is confusion, it is not on our side.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Is the right hon. Lady aware that the Italian chairman of the Federation of European Master Butchers has said that, because of consumer resistance to British beef, British farmers are singularly disadvantaged, as their beef has to be identified in Europe as being British? He said that he is perfectly happy to stock British beef, but knows that, as long as it is, uniquely, labelled as British, he will not because he and other members of the federation know jolly well that no one in Europe will buy it. Can we have an urgent debate on that and ensure either that all countries have to label their beef as French, German, Italian or whatever, or that the ridiculous ban on British beef being exported to Europe without being labelled as British is withdrawn?

Mrs. Beckett: I realise that it is a gross dereliction of duty, but I was not aware of the views of the Italian

chairman of that federation. I know that that is a disgraceful confession, but I must be honest with the House. If he is speaking as an advocate of British beef, that is good. I know that Italy has been a good market for British beef and we hope that it will be again. I understand that the hon. Gentleman and his party are seeking what relics of advantage they can from the aftermath of the BSE crisis. However, in the long term, it would be to the advantage of British agriculture if the labelling of beef as British came to be seen as a mark of quality. Conservative Members should think more carefully about where our long-term interest lies before continuing to assert that such labelling will cause people not to buy British beef.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Leader of the House reconsider her complacent replies to my hon. Friends the Members for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) and for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) and agree to a full day's debate in Government time next week on the role of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the policy on drug prescribing? Is she aware that the Department of Health previously assured Dr. John Chisholm of the British Medical Association that no one would be denied the investigations, drugs or treatments that he or she needed? Is she further aware that the Prime Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) at Prime Minister's Question Time yesterday was markedly different from that earlier pledge? Will she accept from me, in my characteristically non-partisan spirit, that my constituent who suffers from relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis, Caroline Cripps of Westcott in the south of my patch, requires those matters to be urgently addressed? Can we have a full debate on the Floor to thrash them out once and for all without delay?

Mrs. Beckett: I would normally be surprised at the hon. Gentleman returning to a subject on which his hon. Friends have comprehensively lost since I pointed out that what is being said now is what was said and published in 1998. However, I understand that he wished to refer to the case of his constituent, and I recognise his interest and concern in doing so. He knows that NICE is urgently considering MS treatment. Not only is what was said in the past few days about the institute to be found in the consultation document in July, but the White Paper published in December 1997 said:

"Efficiency and quality should go hand in hand . . . Patients suffer if resources are not used efficiently or to best effect."

It has long been clear that the Government, too, recognise the importance of cost-effectiveness.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Yesterday, the Government published the massive Transport Bill, with some 231 clauses and 26 schedules. Will the Leader of the House confirm that despite the pre-legislative scrutiny that one part of it recently underwent, full parliamentary scrutiny will be given to the Bill as a whole? As a mark of her earnest, will she confirm that there will be a two-day debate on Second Reading before Christmas, with perhaps one day on road and rail and the second on the vital matter of the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I cannot confirm any such thing. As the hon. Gentleman says, the Bill has been published only recently; it will be debated in the House in the proper way, and will receive full and proper scrutiny. It is no good for the hon. Gentleman to say dismissively, "despite the pre-legislative scrutiny". Yes, the Bill did receive pre-legislative scrutiny of one of its most important parts. The Bill will be properly dealt with in accordance with the normal conventions of the House.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Would the right hon. Lady be kind enough to amplify the answer that she gave to her hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) about the oath and affirmation that members have to take before assuming their seats in the House? Does she accept that the requirement to take the oath, or to affirm, cannot be altered save by legislation? Will she confirm that, although the House has very properly addressed the matter of Members and their consciences in the past, it has never sought to suspend the requirement for a Member to proclaim and acknowledge the sovereignty of the Queen as monarch?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot amplify my remarks; the hon. Gentleman raises several important issues relating to conclusions that the House came to, presumably many decades ago, as to how we handle such matters. I can only repeat what I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick); the issue is important and I shall make inquiries into it. However, I am sorry that I cannot—on the hoof, so to speak—answer the question today.

Points of Order

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The *Official Report* for Monday contains a list of the members of the Government. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) was omitted from that list. Is there any way that you, Madam Speaker, can confirm for the benefit of hon. Members whether the hon. Member for Islwyn is a member of the Government? Is this something that we should be told?

Madam Speaker: I think perhaps that it was a clear printers' error. However, I am sure that the hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) will be grateful for the oxygen of publicity that he has just received from the Conservative Benches acknowledging his appointment as a new Whip.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. When the Leader of the House discovers that there was a Committee sitting this morning in Room 9 that amended the terms and provisions of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence so that, henceforth, it will have to take account of available resources as defined by the Treasury, will she be able to correct the record of the remarks that she has just made suggesting that the Government have been consistent throughout? Will she be able to change the *Official Report*—to have it amended—or will she have to come to the House to make a statement because she was wrong?

Madam Speaker: I have no comment to make on the political exchanges that take place in the House. I have no responsibility for the comments made either by Ministers or by Back Benchers. However, I note that the hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber while the Leader of the House was answering business questions. I should certainly have been willing to call him so that he could have put the question to her at that time and given her an opportunity to answer for herself. I am sure that that would have been the correct way to proceed.

BILL PRESENTED

TERRORISM

Mr. Secretary Straw, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Cook, Mr. Secretary Reid, Mr. Secretary Murphy, Mr. Secretary Mandelson, Mr. Charles Clarke and Mr. Adam Ingram, presented a Bill to make provision about terrorism; and to make temporary provision for Northern Ireland about the prosecution and punishment of certain offences, the preservation of peace and the maintenance of order: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 10].

Long-term Care

[Relevant documents: With Respect to Old Age: A Report by the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care (Cm. 4192-I); Modernising Social Services (Cm. 4169); Long-Term Care: The Government's Response to the Health Committee's Report on Long-Term Care (Cm. 4414).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

1.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): First, I apologise to the House for the fact that I shall not be here for the winding-up speeches due to a prior engagement. I have informed you, Madam Speaker, and the spokesmen of both the main Opposition parties.

We live in an ageing society. For too long, old age has been seen as a problem. People talk of the burden of an ageing population; some even say that changes in the ratio of working to retired households in our country are unsustainable. That is not the view of the Government. A growing elderly population is a success, not a failure; it should be celebrated, not denigrated. Older people are valuable in our society, not a burden on it. That is why we have taken action throughout Government to improve the health, well-being and security of older people: restoring free eye tests, introducing winter fuel payments, cutting VAT on fuel, the introduction of the minimum income guarantee for poorer pensioners, free TV licences for older pensioners—all of that a recognition of the importance of older people to our society.

Underlying each of these approaches is a recognition that, far from there being a demographic time bomb that will overwhelm society as we have known it, the rate of growth in the numbers of older people in the next 50 years will be about half that of the last 50 years. It is true, however, that there will be more very old people, aged 85 years or more, during the next few decades. That, too, is something to be celebrated, but it means that the way that we care for people in old age must change.

Today's debate gives the House the opportunity to consider these issues in what I hope will be a calm and considered fashion. The future of long-term care is an issue that concerns each of our constituents in each of our communities. Long-term care is not just about caring for older people. It is about younger, disabled people too. The need for changes to the system of long-term care is therefore not just the product of demographic change. Change is needed for other reasons. For too long, standards of care have been too variable. Standards of care have been a matter of local discretion. About 150 local authorities and about 100 health authorities regulate care homes, often to very differing standards. Some services, such as home-based care, are not currently regulated. The regulation system has not been properly independent.

There are very real concerns about the funding of long-term care. Although only one in five old people need long-term care, as they approach old age many more become anxious about how well they will be looked after, who will look after them, how much it will cost and who will pay. The current system has failed to be explicit about these issues, not least because it has developed in such an ad hoc way in recent decades. Under the previous Government alone, there were six major changes to the benefits and rules governing long-term care.

The current system of care is confused and confusing. It provides too many incentives to care for old people in care homes and too few incentives to care for them in their own homes. Arguably, the current system is premised upon the idea that older people do not want what most of the rest of us want—the chance to live a fulfilling life in as independent a way as possible. All the evidence suggests that, all things being equal, older people want to remain as independent as possible for as long as possible.

It is right, therefore, that we re-examine all the issues to do with long-term care in the round. In our election manifesto, we said that we would set up a royal commission to examine the funding issues. In December 1997, we established a royal commission chaired by Sir Stewart Sutherland. The commission took oral evidence, conducted public hearings and received more than 2,000 written submissions. We published its report in March 1999, and I want to place on the record my thanks to the royal commission for all its work.

When the report was published, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) said that he hoped that it would stimulate debate to help find a way of ensuring that people could have access to high quality long-term care that was fair for individuals and the taxpayer. Indeed, the royal commission explicitly called for such a debate. Today the House has an opportunity to take part in that debate.

In the past, there have been too many short-term solutions for long-term care. What is needed instead is a properly considered solution that should be capable of standing the test of time. Today's generation of older people, and the generations to follow, deserve no less.

As the royal commission said, there is no obvious answer. That was reflected in its conclusions; it published a majority and a minority report. Since March, there has been an active debate on the commission's approach and its 23 recommendations. A wide range of ideas and views has been expressed. My Department has received more than 800 responses to the commission's recommendations.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): It is very interesting that the Department has received 800 responses as a result of Sir Stewart Sutherland's excellent piece of work. Does the Minister know off-hand how many that he received were in favour of the minority recommendation of the royal commission?

Mr. Milburn: I do not know the answer. I know from my discussions with Sir Stewart that he, too, has been receiving a fairly weighty postbag. I guess that many right hon. and hon. Members have as well. We need to consider extremely carefully the range of views that have been put forward by a full range of organisations and individuals. We need also to consider the royal commission's recommendations.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Can the Secretary of State tell us how many of the responses that he has received support the recommendations set out in the majority report? Perhaps he could give us a guide rather than an absolute number. Is it 50, 60 or 70 per cent. Can the right hon. Gentleman give us an idea or a clue?

Mr. Milburn: It is so tempting to guess from the Dispatch Box. On balance, however, that is a temptation that I shall probably avoid. *[Interruption.]* I know that Liberal Democrats often guess about policy issues but it is probably wiser that the Government continue to take a considered view of these issues.

Since March, the Government have been taking action to improve long-term care. We are improving services by allocating £140 million over three years to help fund respite care as part of our new national carers strategy. We are providing local authorities with special grants totalling almost £300 million this year to encourage them to help older people return to independent living and prevent their unnecessary admission to institutional care. We are extending direct payments to people aged 65 and over as well as to the parent carers of disabled children.

Our approach recognises that any system for funding long-term care must be part of a wider policy of support for older people. Over the next year we shall extend this programme of support for older people still further. For too long older people have found the care system a bewildering maze full of differing rules and confusing criteria for access to services. There has been a lottery in long-term care just as there has been one for health care. The Government are determined to tackle both.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Has an assessment been made of the pressure upon both the independent and voluntary systems at this stage when we are emphasising community care? So many statutory homes throughout the country have been closed and people are puzzled about what the future holds for them.

Mr. Milburn: I understand the concerns of the residential care sector. I shall be coming to that. However, I do not accept that there is a wholesale crisis in that industry. The hon. Gentleman should remember that over the course of this year, next year and the following year, social services budgets are being increased by more than 3 per cent. in real terms, with an extra £3 billion going to them.

Miss Kirkbride: Not in Worcestershire.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Lady says that she wants more for Worcestershire. She should have a word with the Conservative Treasury spokesmen. They are always telling us that our spending plans are reckless, madness and irresponsible. The Conservatives, Back Benchers and Front Benchers, cannot have their cake and eat it on these spending issues.

We will be taking four important steps to ensure greater fairness and transparency in the care system. First, today we are honouring another manifesto commitment by publishing a new charter for long-term care. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) scoffs. I think that it is an important idea to honour manifesto commitments. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree? "Better Care, Higher Standards" will for the first time give people who need long-term care the information that they need to know what they can expect from their local health and housing authorities as well as social services.

The charter will require local health, housing and social care agencies to implement local charters by June 2000. In that way everybody will know what to expect,

[Mr. Milburn]

how they will be treated and where to go to get effective help and advice. Annual public satisfaction surveys of services covered by the charter will be published.

As we know from our postbags and surgeries, many people going into long-term care, and their relatives, are naturally anxious and worried about their future. I hope that the new approach to setting standards will ease some of these worries and ensure that people receive a higher quality service at this crucial time in their lives.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): It is all very well talking about charters, but the Prime Minister spoke about these issues in the most inflammatory terms during the general election. He said that we, the Conservatives, were

"forcing pensioners to sell their homes"

and that pensioners deserved better than that. There is a royal commission report, and the Secretary of State passed over it in about four minutes. It was allowed to gather dust for six months. Is it true that the report will never get out of the long grass because its recommendations will be too expensive?

Mr. Milburn: I would be extremely cautious if I were the hon. Gentleman. As I remember it, he served as a Minister in the previous Government. They established a royal commission on criminal justice. It was set up in June 1991 and the final Government response was made in June 1996—five years later. If the hon. Gentleman will wait a moment or two, I shall set out very clearly the timetable for our response. It will be far shorter than the previous Government managed with their royal commission.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the announcement he has just made about a long-term care charter is about providing guidance to local authorities to draw up their own local charters? Will he confirm that that was a policy of the previous Government, when they required local authorities to produce community care charters? Is his announcement not just a relabelling and recycling of old policies?

Mr. Milburn: No, that is not true. We want to ensure that there are clear national standards in all areas—in the national health service and in social services, too. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, last week, the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), published new information about the performance of individual social services authorities. I take a fairly fundamentalist view on this issue. I believe that the people who pay for and receive such services have the right to know how well they operate or, in some cases, how poorly they operate. We shall continue the drive to make such information available, not just locally but nationally.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Milburn: Yes, but I will get on to my second point.

Mr. Field: If we publish information about how well local authorities do, is it not important that it is accurate and up to date? Is it not true that the information recently published on Wirral social services was grossly inaccurate on the improvements that Wirral has made not only during the period of the inspection, but, much more importantly, since the inspection?

Mr. Milburn: I am reliably informed by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health that the Wirral local authority not only provided the information that was published, but that it was invited to comment on the draft publication. My right hon. Friend's point is not quite accurate.

Mr. Field: Wirral made comments, but damn all effect they had.

Mr. Milburn: We shall look into that issue, but I am now determined to move on to my important second point; it is only the second out of four.

Secondly, early in the new year, we shall consult on new guidance to give everyone fairer access to social services. We want to iron out the unacceptable variations that exist at present and to create a fair set of rules and procedures that everyone can follow and understand. The aim will be to achieve greater consistency between local authorities in the way that they apply eligibility criteria for accessing all adult social services, including long-term residential care. Importantly, the guidance will stress the need to align social services criteria with NHS continuing health care criteria. It will also stress the need to agree eligibility criteria with housing agencies to ensure a properly co-ordinated response to people's needs.

Thirdly, we also want the care provided to older people by the health service to be of a higher standard in future. Older people are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect wherever they use the NHS. They are entitled to have fair access to health care; age discrimination has no place in the modern national health service that we seek to establish. That is why next year we shall publish a new national service framework for older people. For the first time, we shall lay down clear national standards, defining the treatment and care that older people can expect in all settings—whether in hospital, general practitioners' surgeries or from social services—as they move from hospital into care or back home.

The national service framework will be ready next year for implementation by April 2001. In the meantime, we are making good progress in eliminating mixed-sex accommodation in the NHS, which many old people feel—I agree with them—threatens their dignity and self-respect.

Fourthly—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) is having difficulty counting, but this is my fourth point. Fourthly, we want to ensure higher quality in all aspects of care. We are currently consulting on draft national minimum standards for residential and nursing homes. Final standards will be published next year. The quality of care provided in people's own homes, however, is not currently regulated at all, so in the new year we shall launch a consultation exercise on possible new standards in that area.

The setting and enforcement of standards of home care providers will be central to our drive for higher quality social care services. Other elements will include the first

ever quality strategy for social care, together with improvements in the training, qualifications and regulation of the social care work force, far too many of whom remain unqualified.

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare) *rose—*

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I want to make a little progress. I have given way many times, and I know that many hon. Members want to speak.

Together, those four steps will help to deliver a fairer and better integrated system of care for older and disabled people. They will improve user and carer choice, as well as the consistency and quality of the long-term care system. All those initiatives were either called for by the royal commission, or go significantly beyond its recommendations. In total, we are already actioning 11 of the royal commission's 23 recommendations, so we are making good progress.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I shall give way, and then I shall turn to funding issues.

Mr. Letwin: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I rise on a genuine point of information. Has he just said that he will establish a new police force to oversee how people are, in their own homes, looking after elderly people?

Mr. Milburn: No. The hon. Gentleman should try to put aside his ideological convictions and think about the type and quality of care that people receive. We are contemplating, for the first time, means of ensuring that standards among home care providers are as high as possible. That sector has never been regulated, and as a consequence, as we are all too aware—or should be aware—from our constituency experience, standards have not always been as high as they should be, and in some cases abuse has taken place. We are determined to avoid that.

Mr. Cotter *rose—*

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I shall give way once more and then I must crack on.

Mrs. Humble: Does my right hon. Friend recognise that the many frail, elderly people who are cared for in their own homes by a single carer are more at risk and more vulnerable than elderly people being cared for in a residential setting, where they are surrounded by many more people and have regular visitors? That is one reason why it is vital to consider regulating home care.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support. I know that she comes from an active background in social services and that she understands the issues. Social services authorities are all too aware of some of the problems that occur precisely when the system of domiciliary care services is improperly regulated.

Many of the royal commission's suggestions for changes to the funding system for long-term care have substantial cost implications, both now and for the future. Those costs range from over £1 billion a year to over £6 billion a year. As a Government, we are committed to a prudent, disciplined approach to public spending, so we have already set out our spending plans for the three years to March 2002.

Looking to the future, the 2000 spending review will agree new spending plans for a further two years. We intend to complete the review by next summer. It will aim to find out how best our spending programmes can contribute to achieving the Government's overall objectives. In particular, we want to create a fair, inclusive society where communities are secure and healthy. Improving the care of older people will be an important element of the Department of Health's input into the spending review. The review will consider long-term care funding, alongside changes to improve the quality and delivery of care. Our proposals on financing long-term care will be completed next summer when funding decisions will be announced. We aim to publish a White Paper around that time.

We shall base any future reforms in this area on three key principles: choice, fairness and quality. Similarly, just as elsewhere in our welfare reform programme, our policy will be that people should provide for themselves where they are able to do so. In particular, people prefer and should have the opportunity to remain at home for as long as possible. There will, of course, be situations where a person needs to be admitted to a residential care or a nursing home, and that choice should be available, but any reforms to the system of long-term care must reflect and reinforce the crucial policy objective of encouraging independence through choice.

We know that we need to find a fairer way of funding long-term care for the future. There are around 375,000 older people in residential care and nursing homes in England. The taxpayer already helps to fund the care costs of about three quarters of them, fully or in part. Of those people in residential care and nursing homes, about 100,000 with assets over the present capital limit of £16,000 fund their own care. We established the royal commission because of widespread criticisms of the current arrangements.

The means test for residential care is hard on those with only modest amounts of capital, usually their family home, and lower retirement incomes. It also leads to a widespread fear that people will be forced to sell their homes in order to fund their long-term care requirements. There can be pressure for the immediate sale of the home when people enter care. Sometimes, of course, selling an empty house makes sense, but premature sale can rule out the possibility of people returning home after some support and rehabilitation. Many older people are anxious about a decision to sell, and the move into care can itself be extremely stressful.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Does he agree that long-term care requires long-term solutions? Is he aware that the average worker, over a 40-year

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

working life, pays more than £100,000 in national insurance? Would it not be better to move towards a system whereby a properly funded pension was built up, which could be put towards the funding of proper long-term care?

Mr. Milburn: As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, we must consider these highly complex issues. They are issues not just for the Department of Health. They cut across the entire Government—the Department of Social Security, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Treasury and other Departments are all involved in the discussions. It is extremely unlikely that there is one simple big-bang solution, but it is important that we understand the nature of the problem in order that we can begin to posit where we could move in the future.

Mr. Burstow *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: No, I will not give way. I have already taken too much time and I must move on.

There are insufficient incentives for authorities to rehabilitate and support people in their own homes. The charges that people pay for care at home vary too much between different parts of the country. Private financial products for long-term care, as they are currently structured, do not deliver attractive options for most people who have to pay for their own care. Finally, the system as a whole needs better ways of assuring and improving the quality of care.

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): The Secretary of State said that one of his principles was fairness. As he develops his proposals, will he bear in mind that what many people regard as one of the most unfair elements of the present system is having to sell the family home, particularly a modest family home, in order to qualify for state assistance, whereas others who have not struggled to build up a home of their own are in a better position?

Mr. Milburn: I understand that. I understand both the unfairness and the very real fear that that causes among people who are growing old, their relatives and carers.

Mr. Burstow *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman because he is so persistent, but that will be the last time.

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for recognising my persistence. Will he ensure that when he returns to the House after the review, he can justify the present situation in which a dementia sufferer must pay for nursing care? How can that be fair? Will it be addressed in the review?

Mr. Milburn: I shall come on to these important issues in a moment. They were raised explicitly by the royal commission and in the commission's consultation, and I am sure that they are reflected in the postbag that the Department of Health has received since the royal commission produced its report.

It is now time to explore practical ways of addressing these fundamental failings in the current long-term care system, and I shall set out for the House how we intend to do just that.

Many of the possible changes to the funding system raise complex practical issues. As part of the 2000 spending review process, we shall be exploring some of those issues and the commission's recommendations in detail. The royal commission raised six issues in both the minority and majority reports which we are examining in particular detail.

First, the royal commission recommended that consideration should be given to providing nursing care free, whether delivered in the NHS or in private nursing homes. Even within the royal commission, there were different approaches to the definition of nursing care. We will be working with interested parties to see if the definitional problems can be overcome. Come what may, we will need to weigh that option against other priorities for funding long-term care.

Secondly, we intend to explore with the financial services industry how it could best design long-term care insurance products and other financial products to see if they could be made attractive to a wider audience.

Thirdly, we are exploring the costs and effects of possible changes to the residential charging rules. Those include the treatment of houses where a former carer continues to live. They also include measures to ensure that local authorities use their powers to avoid an immediate sale by helping with care home fees while taking a charge over the person's home.

Fourthly, we are considering the implications of changes to two social security benefit payments. As we said in the social services White Paper, we are considering transferring to local authorities the funds for the income support residential allowance, which is currently paid only to people living in independent residential care homes. We are also considering transferring to local authorities the funding and care management responsibility for people who entered care homes before the 1993 community care changes and who have preserved rights to income support towards their care costs.

Fifthly, we are reviewing policy and guidance on continuing health care with a view to improving consistency and equity of access to services.

Sixthly, we shall consider the implications of a forthcoming report by the Audit Commission on charges for care at home, as we look at ways of reducing the scale of variations in local authority domiciliary care charging policies.

Where appropriate we intend to publish short consultation papers on those issues. The lead Government Department in each case will involve key organisations, including users and carers as well as independent sector care providers. That detailed work will help to inform the Government's final decision on the future funding of long-term care following the conclusion of the next spending review.

As well as preparing for that detailed work on funding issues, we have been considering the royal commission's other central recommendation for a national care commission. Devolution means, as the royal commission recognised, that the remit of any such organisation is likely to be confined to a single country. However, we

believe that many of the functions proposed for a care commission are just as usefully done for England as for the United Kingdom as a whole.

The four main roles suggested for the care commission were monitoring, representing the consumer, providing national benchmarks and encouraging the development of better services. Those are all important. Each is already being carried out, at least in part, by existing organisations, including my Department, ombudsmen for the NHS and local government, and professional training and regulatory bodies. We also believe that there is merit in bringing together many of the individual functions suggested for the care commission through a single organisation covering England. The key test is that any such body should have a coherent role which will improve matters for everyone who needs long-term care.

Our social services White Paper published last November proposed the establishment of eight regional commissions for care standards to enforce new minimum standards for residential as well as domiciliary services. In the light of the royal commission's report I have looked again at whether eight regional bodies would give us the national overview and consistency that we seek. I have concluded that they would not. I can therefore announce today that we have decided broadly to accept the royal commission's recommendation in this area. Our Bill on care standards will establish a single national care standards commission. The measure, which sets out its broad functions, will be introduced in another place today. The commission will take up the four main roles that the royal commission proposed and will, therefore, be established in the way in which the royal commission suggested. I hope that the Bill will complete its parliamentary stages next summer.

The national care standards commission will be responsible for ensuring that all long-term social care in this country is provided at a consistently high standard. For the first time, there will be a single, independent, national watchdog, which will be responsible for ensuring high standards of care wherever it is provided and whoever provides it. The new regulatory regime will be simpler and more streamlined than previous regimes, and, crucially, there will be a level playing field for public and private sector providers.

The new commission will be uniquely well placed to advise and inform Government and consumers. It will build on its regulatory function by monitoring and reporting on trends in the provision of long-term care. We also intend that the commission will be able to put together the information with demographic and resource data, and thus advise Government, as required, on trends in the long-term care market.

The commission will have the power to investigate complaints and to report on them. It will also be able to ensure that consumers have clear and accurate information on services. Building on its regulatory role, it will be able to take a view on quality standards nationally, as well as reporting publicly on each of its inspections. The standards that it enforces will include output measures, and it will have to reflect the views of local service users on the service.

The commission will report every year on service performance against standards, and it will give providers advice on meeting the national standards. It will also be able to run helplines to guide people to registered providers.

Overall, the national care standards commission will be a powerful new body, which, I believe, will make a major contribution to driving up standards of care and to giving people the necessary information to make choices about their long-term care needs. I hope that it will be up and running by spring 2002.

The Government are committed to improving long-term care for older people and for disabled people. The changes that we are already implementing, and the further changes that I have outlined today, seek to promote choice, improve quality and provide fairness for people who need long-term care.

The royal commission has played its part, and I thank it for its work. My speech today, by outlining work in progress and broadly accepting one of the royal commission's two main recommendations, shows that we are tackling seriously and constructively the issues that it raised. My announcement today is not our last word on long-term care, but it shows our determination to take the necessary steps to put long-term care on a sounder and more sustainable footing.

1.48 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): The Secretary of State has created a smokescreen of minimalist announcements and reheated old announcements in his attempt to distract attention from the Government's simple failure to address the royal commission report's principal recommendation. There is much worthy exploring and investigating, but nothing of substance. I hope that the Secretary of State appreciates the disappointment that his words will cause those up and down the country who have waited with bated breath for some sign of a Government response to the royal commission report, which has been in the Government's hands for nearly nine months.

Mr. Kirkwood: The hon. Gentleman puzzles me. I have a brief from the Conservative parliamentary resources unit—

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I hope the hon. Gentleman paid for it.

Mr. Kirkwood: I shall happily pay for it—it is a very useful document. It contains a revealing sentence:

"Over the next few months, the party will develop new areas of policy which will be ready well before the next general election."

Is the hon. Gentleman criticising the Government for that?

Mr. Hammond: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is reading Conservative research department briefs—perhaps he seeks a position in the shadow Cabinet. However, his idea of opposition may be different from mine. We shall develop our policies and put them before the electorate at the next general election. They will be based on our response to Government policies that are outlined at that time. It is no part of our responsibility to develop policies and feed them to the Government to steal from us—just as the hon. Gentleman has acquired that brief by means that we know not.

It is a delicious irony that the Secretary of State, who has come to the House today to defend the Government's inaction in response to the principal recommendations of the royal commission report,

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may be the Treasury Minister who ensured that those recommendations were rejected in the first place. Before the general election, Labour apparently identified long-term care as an area for urgent action. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it identified that as an area to be exploited in the pursuit of votes. In a press release dated 10 March 1997, the then shadow Secretary of State for Health said:

"We will establish a royal commission which will lead a national debate on a comprehensive review of the care system. Changes cannot be made piecemeal."

I hope that the Secretary of State will bear that in mind as the Government embark, as he has said, on an exercise to cherry-pick the report and dribble out a series of piecemeal changes, as he has admitted they are doing.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): The hon. Gentleman has said that the Government have rejected the main recommendations of the report. There are two main recommendations, one of which they have accepted. They have promised a response on the other within months, so how does he explain his assertion?

Mr. Hammond: Well tripped. When I referred to the principal recommendations of the report, I meant the one concerning funding. As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is the key issue being debated in the country and it is of key concern to the 400 organisations that submitted evidence to the royal commission. We must address ourselves to that issue first and foremost.

In a press release dated 25 April 1996, the—now—Secretary of State himself said:

"Labour would end the geographical lottery in community care by setting national eligibility criteria for NHS continuing care".

To date, the Department of Health's contribution to fulfilling that pledge has consisted of intervening with taxpayers' money in the Coughlan case to overturn the court decision and re-establish the legal basis for precisely that

"geographical lottery in community care".

Most laughably of all, in a press release dated 10 March 1997 the current Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport told the world that by focusing

"on quality rather than throughput in the NHS we will remove the perverse incentives for hospitals to discharge patients too early".

In office, the Government have sacrificed quality of care and practically everything else on the altar of throughput in an attempt to meet the Prime Minister's waiting list pledge. Far from ending premature discharging, the system of cash bonuses and penalties that they have introduced has encouraged health authorities and trusts to discharge patients early.

Immediately after the general election—in fact, on the first day of the new Parliament—the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), then an Under-Secretary at the Department of Health, gave some pointers to the Government's thinking:

"We recognise . . . the importance that people attach—particularly in their later years—to the home in which they have lived all their lives and which, if they are home owners, they hope to pass on".

He identified at that stage that avoidance of enforced home disposals was a key issue. In the same debate, he said:

"The previous Government . . . began a process of consultation on insurance provision as a response to the crisis in long-term care . . . We will not go down that road."

He was ruling out in advance any consideration by the royal commission of an insurance-based solution—a policy that contradicts the later Green Paper on welfare reform—which does not seem to have done his career any harm. However, I was interested to hear the Secretary of State apparently ruling insurance-based solutions back into the equation.

The then Under-Secretary went on:

"For us, consensus on how we provide for our senior citizens . . . is a critical issue that we do not intend to shirk."—[*Official Report*, 14 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 156-58.]

Whether he intended it or not, the Government have given a pretty good imitation of shirking. After the setting up of the royal commission in December 1997 and its reporting in slightly more than 12 months, as it was asked to do, nine months have passed during which the listening audience of 10 million pensioners could have heard a pin drop.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): Will the hon. Gentleman remind the House of how long it took the then Tory Government to respond to the Audit Commission's 1984 report? Was it not an Act of Parliament of 1990, which then took three years to implement, that represented that response?

Mr. Hammond: What I will remind the hon. Gentleman of is the fact that, at the last general election, the Conservative party presented a specific proposal for starting to deal with problems in long-term care. The then Opposition rubbished that proposal, and promised the public an urgent alternative solution. Here we are, two and a half years later, with 100,000 more homes forcibly sold to pay for long-term care; and what has the Secretary of State told us today? He has told us that we shall have to wait another year for the Government's solution.

The former Secretary of State, who presented the royal commission's report to Parliament, indicated that he agreed about the need for an informed debate on the recommendations. Given that he told us in the same statement that the commission had taken evidence from 400 organisations and received more than 2,000 written submissions, had made more than 100 visits and had met 1,000 individuals—all of which had informed its recommendations—I think we are entitled to ask what further debate will achieve, other than providing the Government with a fig leaf enabling them to reach conclusions that are diametrically opposed to those of the commission.

More experienced hands than me, both inside and outside Parliament, instantly recognised in the call for informed debate Whitehall-speak for "Drive it into the long grass, and hope that it gets lost." Ministerial answers to oral and written questions since then have confirmed that view. Typical was a question posed on 6 July by the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), who humbly inquired when the Secretary of State expected to have concluded the debate. And the answer he received?

"We expect that debate . . . to be an on-going one".—[*Official Report*, 6 July 1999; Vol. 334, c. 499W.]

In other words, "Never".

Even more enigmatic was the Prime Minister's reply to a similar question asked by me on 26 July. He told me:

"We are considering the Royal Commission's proposals and the reactions to the Commission's report. We will announce our decisions in due course."—[*Official Report*, 26 July 1999; Vol. 336, c. 30W.]

That prompts us to ask whose reactions were being considered—those of the hundreds of organisations that have welcomed the commission's principal recommendation with open arms, or those of the Prime Minister's next-door neighbour.

The truth is that the Government set up the royal commission expecting it to propose a low public spending solution. The Government would then have hidden behind the commission's report, and argued that it had weighed the evidence and reached a proper conclusion. Unfortunately for the Government, however, the commission did not play ball.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: May I make a point on that very subject of funding? Is my hon. Friend aware of a serious report in today's *Times*? It states that, according to the Royal College of Nursing,

"many of the 42,000 nursing home residents who pay for all or some of their nursing home costs could be entitled to have the nursing care element of their fees paid".

Furthermore,

"Christine Hancock, general secretary of the RCN, said that the way health authorities used criteria to exclude the vast majority of nursing home residents from long-term NHS care amounted to 'wholesale rationing in the NHS'."

Is that not wholly contrary to what Ministers, including the Prime Minister, have been saying? Unless further funds can be found for the health service, there will be no real solution to the long-term care problem.

Mr. Hammond: I have seen the draft report from the Royal College of Nursing, which will be published tomorrow, and I will shortly deal with the implications of the Coughlan judgment and access to long-term care.

The Government find the report's principal recommendation unacceptable, but they have not had the courage to say so openly. Only the persistence of the grey lobby has prevented the ball from being lost in the long grass—and, if I may say so, only the repeated insistence of Opposition Members has eventually given the House an opportunity to consider the matter.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Is my hon. Friend aware of the recommendations of the Select Committee on Health consequent on the report? It said:

"Failure by the Government to act urgently would be a serious dereliction of duty."

Does my hon. Friend think that there might be anything in the fact that the Select Committee happens to be abroad while we are holding this debate?

Mr. Hammond: The Secretary of State feigns amazement, but my hon. Friend is right. The Health Committee clearly stated that failure to act urgently on the commission's recommendations would be a gross dereliction of duty. I was looking forward to hearing whether the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), the Committee's Chairman, regards the Government as guilty of that charge. Sadly, as we know, the debate has been timed to ensure that some of the most well informed and interested Members who would have wanted to contribute cannot be here. Most notably, some Labour Back Benchers who are critics of the Government on the issue are not able to take part in the debate. I look forward to a discussion with the hon. Gentleman, when he returns, to find out his view on that issue.

One suspects that the only debate on the royal commission report that really mattered happened long ago in the Treasury and that the conclusion of that debate was clear some time before the public even saw the report. As I have said, one might speculate even that the Secretary of State for Health, then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, would almost certainly have been the one wielding the veto.

Meanwhile—we must never forget the point—each year, some 40,000 home owners whose plight the then Under-Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Brent, South, so touchingly acknowledged in May 1997, have been forced to sell their homes to pay for long-term care. Another 100,000 homes have been lost as another early pledge gathers dust.

Mrs. Humble: How many people were saved the indignity and distress of selling their homes by the Conservative Government's proposals to increase the limit to £16,000 in the early 1990s?

Mr. Hammond: A number of people will have been saved that indignity and distress by the increase in the limit. It is self-evident that if the thresholds are increased, fewer people will be caught by the trap. At the general election, the previous Government proposed immediate relief—not a total solution to the problem—which the Labour party rejected outright with the promise that it had a comprehensive solution. Two and a half years later, 100,000 homes have been lost and no comprehensive solution is available.

Dr. Palmer *rose—*

Mr. Hammond: I allow the hon. Member for Broxtowe to intervene and tell me what the royal commission said about those proposals.

Dr. Palmer: The royal commission said:

"The scheme as presented by the previous Government was rather complex, and it was difficult to see where the benefits lay, and to whom."

I also note that a later paragraph casts considerable doubt on the £40,000 figure.

Mr. Hammond: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman believes that everything in the royal commission report should be accepted. Is he arguing that all the report's arguments should be accepted by the Government and the House? I do not accept the royal commission's analysis of the previous proposals.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the private insurance industry feels that it was not given an adequate opportunity to present its ideas to the royal commission. The royal commission rightly observed that private insurance could never be the complete solution. The industry itself has acknowledged that, but it feels that it

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was not given an adequate opportunity to put the case for a mixed model of private insurance and public provision. Now the Secretary of State has effectively told us that the Government are considering going down the route of private insurance.

The range of options is no different from what was available in May 1997. The only difference is that 100,000 people who could have benefited then from change have already lost their homes. "The debate" is code for delay and indecision, while a private battle rages between the Treasury and the Department of Health over who should take the rap.

Mrs. Sylvia Heal (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): The hon. Gentleman appears to be concerned about people losing their homes as a result of the cost of long-term care. I suggest that he refresh his memory as to which party was in power when many long-stay national health service beds were closed and care was transferred from the NHS to local authorities, which marked the beginning of the policies that he is now criticising. I remind him, in case he has forgotten, that it was, of course, the Conservative party.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Lady is right, but that is not the point that we are discussing. I shall come to the demarcation line between NHS continuing care and social care provided by local authorities in a moment.

I make no apology for concentrating the greater part of my remarks on the Government's inaction in response to the royal commission's principal recommendation, which is about funding. However, the report also deals with other vital issues that remain largely unaddressed as a result of the Government's paralysis over the principal recommendation.

The provision of care—what type of care, what type of choice and who should provide it—is as important as the means of paying for it. I was pleased to hear that the Secretary of State agrees that choice is the key. We must never forget that in discussing long-term care for the elderly we are talking not about statistics or units, but about individual people—and elderly people at that, who almost by definition have clear and precise ideas about what they want and do not want. No single model of care will provide adequately for such a disparate population. It is essential that in structuring a funding system we should seek to stimulate choice and diversity in supply so that provision is responsive to the needs and wants of the individuals who will use it.

There is a consensus across the House that the promotion of domiciliary care—care for people in their own homes—is greatly preferable where practicable. All the surveys show an overwhelming preference among elderly people for staying in their own homes for as long as possible. I was interested in the Secretary of State's announcement on standards for domiciliary care and his allusion to the possibility of a short-term disregard at the beginning of a period of care to avoid what might be termed accidental institutionalisation of people because they needed to leave their homes for a relatively short period. It was disappointing that the Secretary of State had nothing concrete to say on that, even though the press had been speculating that the Government might be able to make an immediate announcement.

The Government have rightly recognised the vital role of voluntary carers in supporting the elderly, among others. How best to support them—whether to provide support directly or through more effective respite provision—is a matter for debate. There is broad consensus that support for carers is not only a moral imperative, but economic common sense, recognising the huge burden of work that they shoulder, unpaid and often unsung. I hope that the Secretary of State will acknowledge that we confirmed to his predecessor our broad support for the initiatives on that.

There has been a significant transformation in recent years, as local authorities have increasingly retreated from the direct provision of accommodation. However, there is still a significant amount of local authority accommodation in the system. We support the Government's proposals, subject to seeing the details, to level the playing field by requiring local authority care homes to meet the same standards as those operated by the independent sector. I should like an assurance that the final standards that the Secretary of State alluded to will be available before the House has to consider the forthcoming Bill on care standards, so that if, as we suspect, the detailed standards are to be introduced by regulation, we might at least have an idea of the standards that are to be imposed later when we consider the principal provisions of the Bill.

Mr. Cotter: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has had the same experience as I have. Residents in residential homes have expressed concern in my surgery that their homes might be closed. Does he agree that any future regulations must be implemented sensitively, particularly with regard to the size of rooms in residential homes? A lot of small homes are concerned, and we hope that a constructive point will be made here.

Mr. Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for introducing that point. The Government have gone about this from the wrong angle. The "Fit for the Future?" document is an inspector's document, designed for the convenience of inspectors. It seeks to focus on what is easily measurable and to ignore what is not, including—importantly—the overall care experience of residents. It totally fails to acknowledge the individuality of elderly people, some of whom may have different needs and wants from others.

In its present form, the proposal would drive a significant part of the independent sector—and an even larger part of the local authority sector—out of business. We have to hope, for reasons both philosophical and practical, that the Government will approach the draft standards with caution, especially as they refer to minimum room sizes. It is for that reason that I asked the Secretary of State to give an assurance that we will be able to see the definitive form of the regulations before we debate any Bill on care standards, or at least at the same time.

Mr. MacGregor: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Is it not essential that the costs to both sectors be fully taken into account, especially if the income to meet those costs does not follow? I suspect from what the Secretary of State said earlier that it is unlikely that that income will follow. It is therefore essential that, in any

steps that are taken, an assurance be given to private and local authority homes that the income will be there to meet the extra costs.

Mr. Hammond: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, too. One cannot have quality without paying for it. If one is prepared to pay for it, one does not need regulations to get it. If providers were offered premium payments for premium products, they would be happy to provide them.

The Secretary of State has not introduced any voluntary premium payment scheme—or encouraged local authorities to pursue such a scheme—to increase the standards of the physical amenities and the training of staff in care homes, and intends to do that by regulation. From that, we can only conclude that he is not willing to pay or to provide the resources that will be needed to support the Government's wholly laudable aspirations.

The Secretary of State will be aware that although he said that there was no crisis facing the financing by local authorities of care, his much vaunted increase in social services spending has not been distributed evenly around the country. I am sure that there is not a problem in Darlington, but there is certainly a problem in Surrey, Sussex, Hertfordshire, Oxfordshire, Essex, Kent, Buckinghamshire and Worcestershire.

Local authorities' own funding crises have forced them to keep payments to independent sector providers down below the rate of cost inflation and, in some cases, below their break-even levels. This has resulted in local authorities in some areas—Hertfordshire, for example—being unable to purchase beds in the independent sector at a price they are willing or able to pay. The evidence for that—as the Secretary of State will know—is to be found in the re-emergence of extensive bed blocking by elderly people awaiting social services placements across the south-east of England, before the onset of the—now routine—winter crisis.

The scandal is that, against the background of inadequate funding, leading to a drying up of independent sector supply, there are still many local authorities all over the country which are directing elderly people to local authority-provided accommodation that carries with it a much higher cost than equivalent or better independent sector accommodation.

Without bringing ideology into this matter, it seems to me that there can be no justification in a resource-constrained environment for restricting the total amount of care that can be purchased by a local authority by buying a more expensive product, where an equal quality, less expensive one is available. I urge the Secretary of State to take steps to assess the scale of the problem, and to calculate the additional care that might be purchased with the money saved if expensive local authority provision were substituted by better value independent sector provision.

The figures are substantial. In many councils—on local authorities' own admission, as the Secretary of State knows—the cost of providing care in their own establishments is 60 per cent., 70 per cent., 80 per cent. and, in some cases, more than 100 per cent. higher than the price at which they can buy comparable care in independent sector establishments.

On eligibility, I am grateful for the comments made by hon. Members, and by the Secretary of State. The dividing line between NHS and social care for the elderly is of great importance, because NHS continuing care is free but local authority care is subject to the means test, making this a critical issue for many families. The royal commission's principal recommendation would greatly reduce, if not entirely eliminate, the significance of the distinctions.

If the Government have set their face against that recommendation, they have to revisit the aftermath of the Coughlan judgment and issue clear, transparent and universally understood guidance as to the demarcation line between free NHS care and means-tested social care. I am not entirely sure whether the Secretary of State's mini-announcement earlier was an undertaking to do that early in the new year. If it was, I welcome it.

To date, the Department of Health's involvement in the matter has been limited to paying lawyers to slug it out. I see that the Royal College of Nursing is now spending its money on obtaining counsel's opinion on the matter. I say to the Secretary of State that it is abundantly clear that this is a policy issue, requiring a political decision. It is a job for Ministers, not lawyers.

It will be clear from what I have said that there are huge areas beyond the central issue of funding which can and must be addressed if we are to establish a proper system of long-term care delivery in this country. At present, unsurprisingly, the focus of attention is on the Government's response—or lack of it—to the central recommendations of the royal commission. Until we understand how the Government are to take that agenda forward, there can be no real progress on the broader issues.

I hope that the Secretary of State will contemplate the fact that while he ponders and announces another delay of six or eight months before something is to be done, 800 people each week are losing their homes to pay for their long-term care needs.

Mr. Milburn: That is pathetic.

Mr. Hammond: I am sure that the people facing the loss of their homes while the right hon. Gentleman dithers and considers the matter further do not agree with him.

Mr. Leigh: May I be fair to the Government for a moment? Sir Stewart Sutherland and his colleagues have put the Government in an impossible position by asking for an increase in spending of up to £6 billion. The key is the means test, and I hope that my hon. Friend will commend the note of dissent from the royal commission report—particularly the point made on page 115 concerning

"modifying the existing means-test, so that it is less harsh towards people with small amounts of wealth and does not force elderly people to sell their home".

That seems to be a sensible proposal, and I hope that both sides of the House can agree that we should at least do that.

Mr. Hammond: I thank my hon. Friend, and there is much to be recommended in the minority report of the royal commission. I can assure my hon. Friend that we are working hard with outside bodies and looking at an appropriate response to the issues raised by report.

There is much in the royal commission's report that all sides will welcome and can agree on, but it seems to me that the commission has missed one of the most important

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points. The crisis today in long-term care arises from a real and genuine sense on the part of many older people of a breach of contract by the state. For years—perhaps all their working lives—they paid high taxes on the assumption of a cradle-to-grave welfare system. That system changed, as it had to if our nation was to prosper, and this generation of politicians and taxpayers—operating in a globalised economy—prefers, indeed needs, lower taxes. The intergenerational contract, to which the report refers, has failed. The state, as a contracting party, suffers from a fatal flaw—it is above the law and reserves to itself the right to change the rules unilaterally and, in the case of the time scales for the subject of this debate, at the whim of generations of politicians yet unborn. When the report speaks of a contract between Government and people, and between all generations of society, it means not a contract but a blind faith that can draw little inspiration from experience.

I make a distinction between the need for a system for future generations and the need to relieve the immediate, legitimate concerns of today's generation of pensioners. If a system for future generations is to command the confidence of today's 20-somethings that it will deliver for them 50 years hence, it will have to be based on enforceable contractual rights or on individual control of assets. A vague promise of "pay up now and we will look after you later" is unlikely to convince them.

Government policy would appear to dictate that the partnership between the state and the individual for future generations will depend on the principle that those who can make planned provision for their long-term care should do so. One of the principles of the Government's Green Paper on welfare reform says precisely that. We urgently need to know what the Government's solution for future generations of older people will be.

There can be no doubt in anyone's mind that today's generation of retired people have legitimate expectations that the current system does not meet. The royal commission has proposed a solution for them based entirely on an additional public spending commitment, but it also offers the same solution for future generations, which inevitably generates an open-ended public spending commitment scary enough to guarantee a Treasury veto.

Today's elderly are left in limbo because the Government will not seize the initiative and separate the question of provision for them from the longer-term and perhaps more challenging question of provision for future generations. It is only by separating those two issues that there is any hope of clearing the Treasury hurdle and moving forward rapidly to address the real injustice that is being experienced by hundreds of thousands of older people. In each week of delay that goes by, another 800 pensioners lose their homes.

The Government, in this area as in so many others, have cynically raised voter expectations. Now they must deliver on those expectations or pay the price.

2.23 pm

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): I am sure that we can all agree that this debate is very important. It affects many people—not just the elderly, but those with disabilities and young people who will need to look to the future when they may need long-term care. The Government inherited a system in a mess. It was full of uncertainty, with no coherent policy on funding for long-term care. That has caused concern and anxiety to the users of the services and to the planners who need to deliver the services.

In what is a complex debate, I shall concentrate on two key points. First, we need to consider a fairer system of funding long-term care and finding solutions that are fair to the current generation of older people and to younger people, so that they know what to expect for their futures. Secondly, I shall consider the quality standards necessary to reassure people about the care available to them, given the uncertain and variable pattern found in different parts of the country.

One of the major reasons behind the Government's decision to set up the royal commission was the genuine anger and resentment that had built up in the 1980s and 1990s among many older people who had been forced to sell their homes. That has been mentioned already in the debate. We should not use those older people as a political football—they are real people with real concerns that should be addressed in our debate. The problem is not new, but it demands complex solutions. I doubt whether any homes in my constituency are worth less than the £16,000 capital limit introduced by the previous Government, so virtually all home owners fear losing their homes if they go into residential care.

Many people come to Blackpool and the Fylde coast to retire. They save up and buy a home to live by the seaside, and then when they need residential or nursing care, they face selling the lovely bungalow they had bought to settle in for the rest of their lives. We must find a fairer way to fund long-term care, but—just as important—we must give back to today's pensioners a faith in the state and a belief that Members of Parliament listen to their needs and are willing to address them.

Many of my constituents will welcome the Government's announcement today that they will examine the charges for nursing care. That issue formed a large part of the Sutherland report. It is difficult for many people to understand why nursing care provided in one setting is free, but not free if it is provided in an alternative setting. I hope that all the issues covered by the report will be examined to offer people reassurances and to enable them to understand the system, because they do not understand it now.

I am sure that many people will also welcome ways to delay the sale of a property to finance care. We have all had cases of constituents who had gone into residential care but had then recovered sufficiently to want to go back to their homes, only to find they had a "For Sale" sign outside. Any mechanism that we can introduce to ensure that homes are not sold prematurely will be very welcome.

In this debate, we must consider the spectrum of care available. Many people prefer to remain in their own homes as long as possible, so we need to consider the support services available to them—whether provided by social services, health services, voluntary organisations or church groups. I also welcome the Government's announcement of the long-term care charter. That charter and the draft guidance that was issued to social services, health departments and housing authorities will improve services for people needing on-going support by setting out exactly what they can expect from their local service

providers. Many people come to my surgeries to find out what is available: information should be much more easily available in local libraries and day centres.

The introduction of the charter next year will be a vital step towards the seamless service that should be provided for people. We think of the services as a spectrum that starts with people in their own homes having home helps coming in, then going to day centres, followed by residential care, where they end their lives. However, it does not always follow that pattern, even for people who have been in residential care for some time.

I attended the 100th birthday party of an elderly blind lady who had been in residential care for three years. Two or three weeks before she turned 100 she decided that she could manage in the sheltered accommodation in which she had previously lived. I walked across the road with her to the home in which she had lived until recently, and she marched into the room where all the other residents were sitting around. Even though she could not see any of them, she said, "I know what you are doing. You're all sitting there slumped in your chairs and you're only 70. I'm 100 and you should imitate me and get out into the community." People's social and health care needs can improve, as well as deteriorate, and we need a flexible system that can cope with that.

I especially welcome the Government's announcement that they will look at and regulate home help services. Traditionally, people have thought of such services as involving cooking, cleaning and basic domestic tasks, but that is not so now. Home help services have become home care services, and they are often intensive. The workers going into elderly people's homes perform very personal care tasks for them. Because such work has never been regulated, untrained and unqualified young people have gone into the homes of frail, elderly and vulnerable individuals to perform very intimate functions without supervision or regulation. I believe that those elderly people are therefore at risk. Any mechanisms that we can employ to introduce appropriate registration and monitoring of home care services will reassure them. They welcome the people who come into their homes to look after them, but they need to know about those people's backgrounds and training.

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said about home care help, and I endorse her view that not all the people caring for the elderly are of the appropriate type. I hope that a vetting system can be established, but does my hon. Friend agree that it would have to be statutory rather than voluntary? Does there not have to be a requirement that the people providing that help are vetted, and should not sanctions be applied to people who fall short of the required standards?

Mrs. Humble: I recall that, four or five years ago, Lancashire county council social services department introduced a voluntary system of registration and inspection of domiciliary care agencies. That has worked very well, but such systems do not operate elsewhere in the country. We need to consider whether a national voluntary system would work: if it would not, we should consider putting the system on a statutory basis. The bottom line is that we must protect those vulnerable people who are cared for in their own homes.

I also welcome the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that he is to examine the charges for home care services, as they vary across the country. Why should a frail, elderly person in my area pay more—or less—than one in Kent, Shropshire or somewhere else? It is very important to find a way to remove the huge variation in charges that exists.

There is a perverse incentive for local authorities to place people in residential care, as that is often cheaper than providing intensive support in a person's home. Most people who come to see me want to stay in their homes for as long as possible, but their local authorities often encourage them, for financial reasons, to go into residential care before they want to. As part of the comprehensive review, I hope that the Government will consider that problem and listen to what elderly people say.

We must also remember that not only elderly people require long-term care. In his opening remarks, my right hon. Friend referred to the many younger disabled people who require long-term care and who prefer to receive it in a community setting. I should like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the thousands of informal carers supporting relatives or friends in the community. Over the past two years, I have had several meetings with the parents of adults with disability at one of the day centres in Fleetwood in my constituency. Those parents are in their 70s—some are in their 80s—and have cared for their now adult children throughout their lives. They have done so with love, care and affection, and they have accepted their responsibilities as parents. However, they are getting old: the elderly carers now need care, and the adults with disability must plan for their future.

In Lancashire, the local authority has been developing schemes to involve those carers in planning the future long-term provision for their adult offspring. Some of the necessary resources have come from the very welcome additional funding that the Government have made available to support carers. The carers whom I meet are pleased to be part of the planning process. In the past, they felt very excluded and that decisions were being taken by faceless bureaucrats and social workers a long way away in county hall. They very much welcome the fact that they are now being consulted, but my hon. Friend the Minister of State will not be surprised to hear that they want more—more respite services, more support and more homes in the community for their children.

Many other people in the community provide care. Their role is vital in ensuring that the phrase "long-term care" means what it says. I am sure that all hon. Members will praise the professionals whose job it is to look after people with care needs, in both the residential and community setting. However, without the support of informal carers, many of those professionals could not do their jobs. I hope that the House will take the opportunity provided by this debate to pay tribute to the invaluable work of those informal carers.

The second element that I want to mention is the quality of care. The recommendation for a national care commission is excellent, and will be widely welcomed. Standards of care are very variable, depending on where people live and on whether they are able to find out about the services that are available.

Mention has been made of the quality of care in nursing and residential homes. The Department of Health commissioned the Centre for Policy on Ageing to consult

[Mrs. Humble]

on and prepare draft standards for such homes. Those draft standards included minimum requirements for space, facilities and quality of service provision. I understand that the Government have considered the CPA document and have published a consultation paper entitled "Fit for the Future?".

The question of standards is very important. Everyone wants standards to be improved, but it is also vital to ensure continuing provision in communities so that people can choose. Care for older people should be consistent throughout the country. Many of the requirements in the consultation paper are found already in good quality residential and nursing homes. Other requirements can be adopted at little or no cost, and they will substantially improve the quality of care provided.

However, it must be acknowledged that, in Lancashire, some of the physical elements of the standards could be achieved only with great difficulty, and some could not be achieved at all. It is not easy to move walls in old buildings, for example, and many of the care homes in Lancashire are both old and small. Although many people prefer them because of their homely environment, they would be hard to adapt to modern requirements. Simply knocking down a wall between two small rooms to make a larger one is not always the answer, as that may undermine the viability of a small home.

The regulatory impact analysis in the consultation document attempts to quantify the impact of the proposed changes. Given the surplus capacity in the market, the analysis states that

"compliance could be achieved without markedly destabilising the market."

However, that is not what care home owners in my constituency tell me.

I recently met representatives of the Lancashire Care Association, who told me that of the 556 private homes in the county, 394, or 71 per cent., will not meet the proposed standards. That is nothing to do with the quality of care in the homes; it is the physical nature of the buildings. The picture is even worse in Blackpool, where the figure is 91 per cent. There is understandable concern. My worry concerns the residents of such homes and elderly people planning to enter them as part of their long-term care. We must ensure that there will still be homes for people to go into and that elderly residents in existing homes will not be threatened with evictions or moves. All that must be considered in the context of wanting the highest possible standards.

I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider carefully the representations that have been made. All those to whom I speak, including those in the private care sector, want to improve standards, but they want to have time to do it. They want to discuss some aspects of the document that they feel are not conducive to improving care standards. It is an important issue in my constituency. Lancashire, with perhaps Kent, has the highest number of private care homes. We have 20,000 residential and nursing home beds. It is clearly an issue, but I stress that there is a genuine commitment to move forward because we want top quality homes so that people will want to enter them and, if necessary, enjoy their final years in them.

On a more positive note, Blackpool is improving standards through a new star rating system. People can choose a hotel in Blackpool by how many stars it has, and now they can choose a residential or nursing home in the same way. It is a new and innovative scheme that I commend to my colleagues. I believe that it is the first independent scheme—it is not run by the local authority. There was a good deal of consultation between my local council, the private sector and the voluntary sector to consider ways of guaranteeing standards in homes. They brought in a company called Residential and Domiciliary Care Benchmarking Ltd.

I have seen the documents involved. They are immensely complex and ask a range of questions across every possible aspect of care in a home. Care home owners have to pay for the scheme, which is self-financed, but they come forward voluntarily, answer the questions and are assessed according to the star rating. Blackpool council's care homes have been subject to the same scrutiny as the private sector. The new scheme has already raised expectations, increased staff awareness of good practice, encouraged the spread of training and, perhaps most importantly, enabled purchasers of care—elderly people and their relatives—to make informed choices about which home they want to enter.

Earlier this year, I presented the awards of the first ever star certificates. I hope that more homes will come forward to be tested in that way and so improve standards in the industry. An independent, second opinion on care should help to promote public confidence in the residential care industry, as well as improving the confidence of the people who enter such homes.

The purchase of care is invariably a traumatic moment for individuals and their families and involves major budgetary expense for local authorities. A reliable standard of care is essential to allow the purchase to be made in confidence. Blackpool's system is expected to do exactly that. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will see this as Blackpool moving ahead before the introduction of the new national care commission, and examine it. I am advised that there is information on the net and a website. Brochures will be produced. This is my hard sell; I will give anyone more information about it.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Lady may be interested to know that I visited Blackpool recently and was told all about the scheme. I have just been told that at least one other county council in the south of England is actively considering it.

Mrs. Humble: Where Blackpool leads, the rest of the world follows. This is a serious matter because there is over-provision in residential care and elderly people often do not know what to look for in choosing a care home. Too often, they look at the furnishings and the depth of the carpet instead of asking about the care provided.

Such schemes are an excellent way forward, as are the other proposals announced by the Government today. Long-term care is complex. There are no easy answers, but it is incumbent on us to review and revise the current confused situation to make it fair and acceptable to all.

2.46 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): This is an important and, I hope, informative debate on long-term care and the Government's position. From what the

Secretary of State said earlier, we appear to have moved from the phase where the Government fly kites about what they will do to the phase where they consult and review, but not yet to the stage where they actually do anything. That concerns many who expected the Government to move ahead on such questions, not least the person who said:

"I don't want to live in a country where the only way pensioners can get long term care is by selling their home."

That is what the Prime Minister told the Labour party conference in 1997.

Since then, at least 100,000 people have been forced to sell their homes to pay for their care. Those people had every right to expect that things could only get better after the general election. By the end of this Parliament, the essentials of our long-term care system will remain the same. We will have had a lot of consultation but not much delivery.

What the Secretary of State said was welcome in that it removed some of the veils behind which the Government have been working—feverishly, I hope—to respond to the royal commission. Unfortunately, it was little more than window dressing because it ducked some of the fundamental questions that were raised and, I believe, answered in the report.

I start with a proposition that I hope all hon. Members can agree with: the current system for funding long-term care cannot continue. The status quo is not an option because we are all living longer. As the Secretary of State rightly said, that should be a cause for celebration, but too often the talk is of crisis, demographic time bombs and tidal waves. Such language is unhelpful and divisive because it sets generation against generation and sets older people apart. What is more, it is not true.

The trends are clear, but they are not new. We have had birth certificates to enable us to plan for many years. We know that over the past 100 years, the number of people aged over 85 has increased 15 times. By 2050, there will be three times more people over 85 than today. The demographic time bomb is not ticking; it has already gone off.

As things stand, the way in which long-term care operates robs people of their dignity and drives them into dependency. Care is means-led, not needs-led. Who pays for care depends on where they are being cared for. The economics of health and social care are warped and twisted. Putting means testing at the front end of assessment drives people into high-dependency, high-cost institutionalised care. As a result, the NHS and social services are locked in a vicious circle of crisis management. Bed blocking, cost shunting and buck passing are the hallmarks of the system. This drives standards down, wasting resources and delivering poorer outcomes for many people.

However, what would another Tory term have delivered? The boundaries of state-funded care would have been even more tightly drawn than they were during the previous 18 years of Tory government. The destination of Tory social policy was a residual welfare state, based on exclusion, stigma and less eligibility. If the Conservatives had been re-elected, the fate of the public sector would have been to be the 21st century administrators of a new poor law. Before the general election, the Conservatives set out plans for a private, insurance-based solution to finance long-term care costs. Those plans were complex, as the royal commission rightly pointed out. It noted:

"it was difficult to see where the benefits lay, and to whom."

The American experience of schemes similar to those proposed by the Conservatives shows that take-up has been low. In practice, many current pensioners would be too old, too poor or too poor a risk to qualify for immediate private cover. However, as we have heard today, the Secretary of State wants to examine how the private sector can make itself more attractive through the insurance packages that it offers. If that is to be so, I hope that proposals will soon be introduced for the proper regulation of the insurance market in long-term care. At present, the market is unregulated. If it is to be successful, the industry must be regulated to provide people with security and certainty.

We are only halfway through this Parliament. What have the Government done so far? They set up the royal commission, and the Liberal Democrats very much welcomed that. The royal commission reported in March—almost nine months ago. The Government wanted the commission to report quickly, and the commission delivered its report in 14 months. When will the Government deliver? We have been told that they will produce a White Paper, but when will action flow from that White Paper?

By the end of this Parliament, the essentials of our system of long-term care will remain unchanged. Each year, 35,000 to 40,000 homes will continue to be sold to provide care that many people thought would be provided free when they needed it. More than 100,000 have been forced to sell their homes since the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), announced the royal commission. How many more must sell their homes before there is any action?

Dr. Palmer: We heard earlier in the debate that, despite their rhetoric, the Conservatives are not ready to respond to the royal commission's report and that they may be ready to do so only at the next election, although the tenor of their response was against the majority report. Do the Liberal Democrats have a view? Do they accept the majority report, the minority report or neither?

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman asks a fair question. For the past three or four weeks, I have been making applications for an Adjournment debate on the Coughlan case and its impact on long-term care. I should welcome the opportunity to have such time allocated to me so that we could debate the issue on my terms. In today's debate, the Government are setting out what they are doing, so we must test them on their proposals. The Liberal Democrats welcomed the royal commission and its terms of reference; we believe that provides a foundation on which we can build a modernised—to use the Government's word—long-term care system.

It is no wonder that Labour Members do not want to dwell on their policy, because too many aspects of it will cause great concern to people outside this place—not least the majority members of the commission. The majority members will feel that much of their work—especially in respect of their main recommendation on personal care—has been jettisoned as a result of the statement made by

[Mr. Burstow]

the Secretary of State today. I shall return to that matter. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us when he replies to the debate—*[Interruption.]* If he wants to intervene now to tell us that personal care costs—not just nursing care costs—will be included under the six points that the Secretary of State set out earlier, that would be most helpful.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I am glad to correct the hon. Gentleman's wholly false assumption on that matter. Most of his remarks have been completely inaccurate and wrong. We have not ruled anything out today, and we have not ruled anything in. He is quite wrong to infer from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's speech that we are not giving full consideration to all the royal commission's recommendations.

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful for that non-statement—the Government are not ruling things in and they are not ruling things out—

Mr. Hutton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: Perhaps the Minister would at least allow me to finish the sentence. I shall then be happy to take his intervention.

I listened to the Secretary of State's speech. He spoke explicitly about looking at nursing care and then about definitions. Did he mean that the definition question extends to the possibility of widening the definition of nursing care to include personal care?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman is making heavy weather of this matter.

Mr. Kirkwood: No, he is not.

Mr. Hutton: With respect to the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) is making heavy weather of the matter. I tried to make it clear to him and to the House that we are considering all the royal commission's recommendations, including the one to which he refers. I cannot make it clearer than that.

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. I hope that it will help some of his Back Benchers, who may have been misled by some of the comments earlier in the debate. It is helpful to know that the comprehensive spending review will consider all the royal commission's recommendations, and will thus consider the possibility of providing personal care free at the point of use, based on assessed need. That is important and it is useful to hear it from the Minister.

The Select Committee on Health considered some of those matters, as well as the interface between health and social care, and received some forthright submissions. I quote one of them:

"NHS services are provided to all on the basis of clinical need regardless of ability to pay, whereas local authority services are subject to charges. A particular problem of the caring regime is that many packages of care include elements from health and social services (for example, community nursing from health; home care from social services). Sometimes the difference in the nature of the tasks performed is not clear to the user, and they resent paying for one and not the other. The situation is particularly acute in nursing homes, where a proportion of people are placed by the NHS, free of charge, but the bulk are either local authority placements or self-funders who may have to pay or contribute towards all costs, including nursing costs."

Too right—people resent paying. However, that was not just any submission, but the considered opinion of the Department of Health.

When quizzed by the Committee, even the then Secretary of State for Health had to admit that he could not offer clear definitions of health and social care. It is anomalous for the same type of nursing care to be provided free by the NHS in NHS settings—or paid for by the NHS in nursing homes—but to be charged for in nursing homes. There could be two people sitting next to one another, one of whom could be paying for care while the other received it free.

The Coughlan case has already been mentioned. It brought into sharp relief the way in which the previous Conservative Government redefined the role of the NHS as a provider of acute care, by drawing its boundaries more tightly—dumping and decanting people into nursing and residential homes and shedding responsibility for their care. That is rationing by stealth, as the Royal College of Nursing quite rightly described it.

When asked to explain their continuing care criteria, several health authorities listed tasks that they excluded from NHS care—such as artificial feeding, pain control, care of the dying and catheter care. Seven in 10 older people admitted to nursing homes in England and Wales come from acute hospitals. As other hon. Members have pointed out, those people have chronic, complicated medical and social needs, and multiple problems. However, many of them arrive at nursing homes with inadequate documentation—sometimes with no medical information whatever. Through no fault of their own, those people have drawn the short straw of sickness and dependency.

The courts have made it clear that when nursing care is the principal need, the place in which it is provided is irrelevant—it should be paid for by the NHS. As the RCN revealed today, 90 per cent. of health authorities have illegal arrangements for assessing and meeting the continuing care needs of their patients. I realise that Ministers dispute those figures; perhaps the Minister will comment on the matter in his winding-up speech. Furthermore, I hope that he will commission his own review and publish it, so that the House can debate it.

In February, a national audit of nursing home placements for older people in England and Wales was published, although it did not receive much press attention. It is a technical but important document. It was commissioned by the clinical audit unit of the NHS. It found that one third of all people placed in nursing homes were inappropriately placed; that is about 63,000 people who are so dependent that their principal need is nursing care—63,000 people who should not be paying, who have been let down by the system and who are not receiving the care to which they are entitled.

Even the former Secretary of State had to acknowledge to members of the Health Committee that

"nursing care is something that people have expected would be provided free by the National Health Service . . . so in the eyes of many people I guess to say that all nursing care should be provided free is not an extension of what most people see as the principles of the National Health Service."

We have heard from the Secretary of State that the Government are promising to align social services eligibility criteria with the eligibility criteria for continuing care in the NHS. The findings of the RCN about how the NHS is shirking its responsibilities cause me great concern, and I am sure that many people outside the House will be worried that an alignment of the two will level down, not up, the standards of care that people may expect.

The RCN survey suggests that nine out of 10 health authorities are currently breaking the law. If that is the case, given that the Minister said, in a Health Select Committee meeting in July, that the Government were looking at issuing fresh guidance, I hope that today he can tell the House when that fresh guidance will be published. We need to know soon where the line is to be drawn, because practitioners do not know where to draw it, and it is a lottery whether one gets free nursing care; it depends on where one lives. That position cannot be acceptable; it should not be allowed to persist.

The Government are moving at a snail's pace on other matters, too. Care standards in residential and domiciliary care will remain unchanged during this Parliament, and nothing is proposed in respect of day care and day centres.

I hope that when the Government introduce legislation, we shall, as the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) said, see the regulations for domiciliary care and for residential care alongside the Bill so that those matters may be debated together. However, it is worth bearing in mind the fact that, although the Centre for Policy on Ageing—which carried out for the Government 10 months of detailed work and consultation on residential care standards—presented its new standards to Ministers in January 1999, it was another eight months before the Department of Health published them for further consultation. As a result, a comprehensive set of standards for all regulated services is unlikely to be completed until 2002. As is clearly stated in the impact assessment attached to the document "Fit for the Future?", that is the year when the regulations will start to come into effect. I am sure that the Minister would have put his pen through that statement if it was not the case. I look forward to his telling us that that is wrong, and that the document will be reprinted.

Reports such as those in the *Express* earlier this year show why action is needed now. The *Express* found evidence that residents in one care home were

"put to bed against their will and woken as early as 4.30 am to get ready for breakfast; not properly cleaned even though they regularly soiled themselves; left to sit for hours without activities and woken at two hour intervals during the night to be taken to the toilet because they are not given incontinence pads."

The *Express* made it clear that there was no deliberate abuse at the care home that it investigated, but no one could describe what it found as anything but unacceptable and appalling.

As has been said, there are beacons of good practice. The star scheme that was described by the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) may be a very good way to proceed. Those places that follow good practice need to be recognised and acknowledged. However, there are still too many care homes where care has been reduced to little more than life support.

Why must elderly people wait for the Government to legislate for new commissions for care standards? Why not use the existing inspection and registration system, patchy and inconsistent though it may be, to start to drive up standards? Why must we wait another two years to tackle some of the issues of control, quality and choice? I hope that the Government will stop the dither and delay in that respect.

Dither and delay characterise issues of charging policy, too. It is a further damning indictment of the Conservatives' record in that respect that they failed for 10 years or more to commission any serious work on the impact of local charging policies on the provision of social services. The Government therefore inherited a chaotic picture of charging methods, ambiguous Department of Health guidelines and confused local procedures.

The confusion remains. Local authorities set their own rules, driven by Government funding plans that assume that councils will recoup at least 9 per cent. of what they spend on social care. The variations are enormous. In a recent report, the Audit Commission found that Tower Hamlets recouped 1.1 per cent., whereas Slough recouped 1.5 per cent. Social care charges are a complete and utter lottery. They distort local priorities and fail to meet need. What will the Government do to get things moving? We have heard that there will be further consultation about how a level playing field is to be provided. When will that level playing field be a reality?

The tone and substance of the Secretary of State's speech had more in common with the note of dissent in the royal commission's report than with the majority recommendations, although the note of dissent was not written by two people who agreed with each another on everything. In fact, there was a note of dissent to the note of dissent.

In the kite flying of the past nine months, far too much attention has been paid to the views of the dissenters, and not enough to the majority recommendations. I believe that the dissenters lost the plot during the inquiry, because they were more concerned about cost than social justice and failed to grasp the paradigm shift inherent in the majority's proposals.

In reaching our view about the best way forward, we as Liberal Democrats have set three goals for a reformed system of long-term care. First, the system must promote independence and dignity. The central goal of policy on long-term care should be to ensure the greatest possible opportunity for people to lead the life that they want. Services should be directed to and by older people.

Secondly, the system should ensure intergenerational equity. The risk of long-term care should be spread across the whole population and over the lifetime of the population. That is the most efficient way economically to address both the risk and the cost of insuring against it. Thirdly, the system should be based on co-payment. We believe that it is a shared responsibility between us as individuals and collectively, as a society and a community, to pay the costs of old age.

The royal commission provides a way forward, but all the kites that have been flown in the past nine months and all the negative press briefing have obscured what the majority on the commission proposed.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman used the words "intergenerational equity", but I am unsure what he meant. Did he mean that people now living should pay collectively for those who now need long-term care;

[Mr. Letwin]

or that a person, during the course of his or her lifetime, should pay, effectively, for their own long-term care and that of their generation?

Mr. Burstow: In their evidence to the Health Select Committee, the Government said that many people felt that there was a clear contract between the state and themselves—that they were paying towards not only their own care but future care. I believe that we need a system that reflects the fact that we, as a community, are a wealthy nation, that we can afford to pay for long-term care, and that one generation should be able and willing to afford the costs of care for their elders. That is really what this is about.

All the kite flying that I was talking about obscures some key aspects of what the majority on the commission proposed—first, that a clear distinction should be drawn between living costs, housing costs and personal care; and secondly, that a national care commission should be set up to set standards and oversee the system. We have heard that the Government will consider all those questions, and we welcome the fact that the Minister has clarified that, but hon. Members and people outside the House still do not know what the Government's stance will be in six or seven months, when they publish their White Paper.

We therefore want to know whether the Government will seriously consider, and give high priority to, the commission's proposals on personal care, including nursing care free at the point of delivery after a rigorous assessment of needs. Do the Government understand that such a change would honour the Prime Minister's commitment before the general election to free people from the crippling financial burdens and the prospect of selling their home to pay for care? It would give everyone a stake in how care is provided.

Above all, such a move would mark a step change in the way that care was provided. It would end at a stroke perverse cost incentives and create a level playing field between home-based and residential care. For example, it would remove the need to decide whether a bath was being provided to meet social needs, in which case it would be means-tested, or medical needs, in which case it would be free. By drawing a clear distinction between personal care and daily living costs, the royal commission offers clarity where confusion has reigned.

The second, and equally important, recommendation supported by all members of the royal commission is the establishment of the care commission.

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman started his speech by stating that he could not say whether he agreed with the royal commission's main recommendation on personal care, but—I am sure he will correct me if I am wrong—he has just accepted, on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, the main recommendation about personal care being free. Can he confirm that?

Mr. Burstow: I have been saying that there are very powerful arguments in the majority's report, and I have outlined them this afternoon because not enough has been done to outline them until now; and apparently the Government have not been listening to them, but have been listening far too much to the dissenters.

The debate is about what the Government are doing, not about what the Conservative party or the Liberal Democrats are doing. It is about what the Government, who are charged with this responsibility, are doing, not least because they set up a royal commission to do a job for them and have since spent nine months wondering what to do with its findings.

The second of the Government's main proposals is undoubtedly a welcome piece of news from the Secretary of State. There can be no question but that we need a body to provide a strategic overview of the care system. We shall obviously consider in detail the Secretary of State's proposals when the Bill comes before the House. However, I wonder why we must wait for two more years before the new body comes into being. Why cannot we take a leaf out of another Secretary of State's book and establish a shadow body to start pulling together the necessary elements of the new agency so that it can start to do some of its work in advance? It is possible for a shadow body to be established, and I wonder why the Minister has not considered that possibility.

Mr. Hutton: We have. We have already announced that we shall be doing that. That is what we have in mind.

Mr. Burstow: I am pleased that the Minister has been able to make that announcement. I do not think that the Secretary of State said that a shadow body would be established. The right hon. Gentleman talked about 2002, but we have now had an additional announcement, which is very much welcomed.

I believe that the royal commission offers a rational and humane basis for reforming our care system, but how is the care to be afforded? We know that the costs of the royal commission's proposals come out at about £1.1 billion. All too often we hear the figures of £6 billion to £7 billion, which might be the costs in 2050. I cannot think of any other policy that any Government have produced that has had costings through to 2050. The comprehensive spending review, for example, had a three-year forward view.

If we average out the good and bad years over the past 100 years, our gross domestic product has grown by 2.25 per cent. a year, and over that period there has been an explosion in the number of people living longer. However, we have been able to afford the increased costs. Perhaps these facts have been overlooked.

It is said that the royal commission's proposals will benefit only the well off. I believe that those who produced the minority report have that wrong. If the argument is valid, surely it applies to the winter allowance and free television licences for the over-75s. Both those welcome new universal entitlements are going to rich and poor alike, and they add up to £1.1 billion per annum in public expenditure.

Why is personal care any different? The fact that personal care costs fall heavily and unexpectedly on a few makes the case for ending charges even stronger. That is why I asked the Secretary of State—I did not get a satisfactory answer—why the wealth of a dementia sufferer should determine the care that he or she receives.

The Government set up the royal commission to recommend reform of the long-term care system, and it has reported. However, the report is not a manifesto pledge redeemed on its own. The Prime Minister told us

at the beginning of 1999 that this was the year of delivery. Nine months of dither and delay have fuelled uncertainty about future arrangements for long-term care. Can we have some straight answers? Will the Government rule out free personal care? We have heard that they are not ruling it in, but nor are they ruling it out.

If the royal commission's personal care proposals have no place in the Government's plans, they should make that clear and not wait for a White Paper in six or seven months' time. Are the Government saying that the nation cannot afford to vote an extra one fifth of 1 per cent. of GDP—0.2 per cent.—to the care of senior citizens? The next comprehensive review must deliver a durable and compassionate policy that puts an end to uncertainty about long-term care costs.

We had a royal commission at the beginning of the Parliament, and we have learned today that we shall have a White Paper at the end of it. I fear that many people outside the House will take the view that what we have heard today is little more than a whitewash.

3.13 pm

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): I welcome the debate. I particularly welcome the announcements made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on national care standards; the finance of long-term care; consultation papers on the detail, which we look forward to; access to social services; and minimum standards.

The royal commission has produced a far-reaching report. It is interesting that it is entitled "With Respect to Old Age". Perhaps it should have been subtitled "In Condemnation of the Tory Government". The report includes some damning indictments. It describes the system of care that we inherited when we took power. It refers to it being designed around a series of different bureaucracies rather than around the needs of individual older people. It prevented the national health service and local authorities developing joint working and created a strong lack of trust in the system. The commission says that the result was a sense of betrayal, a lack of trust and a genuine sense of helplessness. That is what we inherited from the Conservative Government. It is so important that we have a response from a Labour Government, who will tackle the inequities and unfairnesses and allow older people to have trust in a system that meets their needs.

Miss Kirkbride: Is the hon. Gentleman proud of those on the Government Front Bench and of the Government, who clearly will not introduce legislation on these matters within this Parliament? Only a White Paper is on offer next summer, not legislation and not real proposals.

Mr. Hope: According to my maths, the Conservatives were in power for 18 years, during which time they could have brought forward proposals to deal with the needs of older people. We inherited a situation where 1 million pensioners were living below the poverty level. We have tackled that directly through a basic income guarantee for pensioners and free television licences for over-75s. We need take no lessons on support for pensioners and other people from the Conservative party.

I shall draw attention to experiences in Northamptonshire and to the work that the county council has been doing in its best value review—one of the most comprehensive and detailed analyses of social care ever undertaken in the county—of residential care for older people. The provision of social care services to older people represents possibly the largest area of activity for social service departments, in terms both of spend and of the number of people receiving those services. The spend in Northamptonshire is about £45 million, and 7,000 people are affected.

The review highlighted the key issue that services for older people cannot be considered in isolation. For example, the provision of residential care is directly affected by home care services, care management and assessment services by other organisations such as health authorities and health trusts, and housing departments. There is a complex interrelationship between different services. If change is introduced in one area, we must consider the impact of that on others.

A critical feature of the review was that the county council widely consulted and involved users, carers and staff at all the homes in the area to ensure that they understood the problems and the issues that the council was trying to tackle and had some ownership of the outcome of the review.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take note of what I am about to present as Northamptonshire's solutions. A consensus has been built up in the county about the right way forward—a way that builds on best practice. I hope that the work that has been done will provide a model that will inform the response and the White Paper when it is published.

Emphasis was placed on offering choice in meeting the needs of older people, on supporting people in their own homes when that is their wish, supporting carers, ensuring high quality in all service provision, joint working between the different agencies that affect the lives of older people and a whole-systems approach. That is designed to ensure that everything is taken into account, including the policies of the health authority and the Department of Health, as well as of the local authority and the social services department. Unless we take the picture as a whole, we create perverse incentives, bed blocking and the practice of passing on elderly people like parcels around the system, without the resources to meet their needs. Unless we adopt a systemic approach, we shall not achieve the outcomes that older people deserve.

All the available evidence from service mapping, activity data and expenditure patterns reveals in Northamptonshire an over-reliance on residential care, with the result that funding is being diverted to relatively high-cost residential care. Fewer resources are available to invest in a broader range of preventive and other services that would help people to be supported at home. That over-reliance on residential care appears to be associated with relatively high rates of admission to hospital of older people, especially those aged 75-plus.

What can we do about that? What is being proposed in Northamptonshire? The research that was carried out in association with the review showed that any decision to enter into residential care does not have to be inevitable. It showed also that early action can be taken to provide support in the community, and that that can alleviate a perceived risk and a major factor. People are predisposed to think that they have to go into care because they cannot be cared for at home. However, if there is a full assessment of need and a consideration of rehabilitation and the wider range of services that can provide support in

[Mr. Hope]

the community, many service users, who would otherwise enter residential care, can be cared for in their own homes. That is an important philosophy for the individuals involved and it has huge implications for the development of services in the community.

The widespread consultation that I mentioned clearly highlighted a strong preference for people to remain at home wherever possible, and the provision of a broad range of community-based services was also seen as particularly important. The need for residential care will remain—there is no question about that—but there should be a strong emphasis on high standards of provision and of care, with more people being cared for in their own homes.

Northamptonshire began to develop specialist services in several key areas. We discovered that rehabilitation can provide the time and the opportunity for service users to regain lost skills and abilities, for example, after a period of hospitalisation or an accident at home. Experience elsewhere suggests that, with the appropriate services, people can be helped to return home with support rather than being warehoused inappropriately in residential care that does not meet their individual needs.

Another area of specialism is respite care. It can provide essential support to carers and it is most effectively provided in familiar high-quality surroundings. Flexible respite care can benefit both service users and carers.

Services for older people with mental health needs must be arranged in a way that is appropriate to the particular needs of that user group. Familiarity and continuity will be important features in that specialist service to offer a continuum of care that offers day, respite and long-term residential provision.

Another area that we considered was access to services and fairness. There is evidence that the take-up of services by members of black and minority ethnic communities is low, although, if special services are provided, the take-up is significantly higher. Therefore, all services—whether in the local authority, the independent or the health sectors—need to ensure that they provide equality of access at all times. An emphasis must be placed on that. As well as recognising the merits of that approach, we need to recognise the merits of supporting initiatives that provide specific services to meet specialist needs. The Government could take many new initiatives to promote equality of access for the black and minority ethnic communities in Northamptonshire and the rest of the country.

Supported housing is another critical way of promoting independence. The importance of developing a range of housing options for older people was widely identified during the consultation process, as a critical element of any strategy to maintain more people in the community. Full consideration of housing needs, through joint assessment arrangements, must be an integral part of any care management activity. The potential of aid, adaptations, new technologies and imaginative approaches to the flexible delivery of care in people's homes must be exploited to the full. I am sure that the Government can do a lot more to promote such innovative approaches. Similarly, a greater availability of very sheltered housing provision, which offers intensive care and support, can be part of the strategy to promote the independence of older people.

The conclusions as to the way forward were interesting. The best value option that is provided in Northamptonshire has three or four main elements. The first involves the transfer of 15 to 17 of the county council's residential care homes to the independent sector. In Northamptonshire, what works is what counts. Seeking to find the right blend of provision includes that transfer. The county council is also developing the specialist services that I mentioned and works with district councils to promote a programme of reprovision in the form of very sheltered housing.

That package enables the commissioning of such specialist services and of very sheltered housing through the release of capital that was locked up in existing long-term care provision. That service model may also be able to attract private finance into the sector in Northamptonshire to support older people. Better value for money is therefore being achieved in the long-term care places purchased by the council, and that releases money for community-based alternatives. Early action to prevent admission to hospital and residential care will limit the growth in the number of people supported in long-term care in the future. The strategy is to keep more people in their own homes and to provide specialist services, very sheltered housing and private sector residential care of a high quality. That strategy will provide a continuum of care for older people in Northamptonshire.

Of course, some issues—especially that of raising standards—need to be addressed. I much welcome the review of standards in residential and nursing homes that is being undertaken. We have seen the draft standards and there are resource implications. If those standards are to be met, we must provide the means to do the job. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) referred to home care, and we need to increase standards there.

If I heard him correctly, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) seemed to say that we did not need regulations for the care of people in their own homes or in council or independent residential nursing homes. I cannot believe that anyone could possibly leave older people vulnerable to the problems that were mentioned earlier without a regulatory regime being in place. That is the legacy of the 18 years of the previous Government that we inherited. We want no more of it; we need a real change. We need proper standards and must take a systemic look at the whole way that older people are handled by all the different providers in the system in any locality to ensure that people are not shunted about.

The Government's announcements are welcome. We all look forward to the White Paper that will be published in response to the royal commission on long-term care. Choice, fairness and quality are critical and we must have action to achieve them. I hope that the experiences and the proposals being introduced in Northamptonshire will provide a model of good practice for the Government.

3.27 pm

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): I wish to focus my remarks on one group of people and on one provision in one piece of legislation. The people on whom

I want to focus are those who are called the "preferred rights group". They were in residential homes on 1 April 1993 and therefore, by definition, they include some of the frailest and most elderly in our community. The legislation on which I wish to focus is section 43 of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990, which inserted a key new section, section 26A, into the National Assistance Act 1948.

The key consequences of what the then Conservative Government did to that group of people were to give with one hand and to take away—and to take away a great deal—with the other. They conferred an entitlement to a higher rate of income support on that group of frail, elderly people and they preserved their rights to that higher rate. However, in section 43 of the 1990 Act, the then Government imposed a statutory block on any form of financial assistance, through local authority social service departments, for that group. That block was total and inflexible and it was not capable of being tailored to any individual's circumstances. It left no discretion whatever in the hands of local authority social services departments and it took no account of the consequences for individuals of those legislative provisions in particular cases.

The course of events in a significant number of individual cases has been as follows: inescapably, as elderly people get older, they become more frail and incapacitated and require more care, and the cost of providing that care inevitably escalates. The residential home is therefore obliged to increase its fees to cover the cost of increased care. As fees go up, they often rise beyond the level of the higher rate of income support. In those circumstances, if the individual resident has no means left of providing additional funding and has either no relatives or none willing or able to provide the increased funding, one appalling option is left—eviction.

The royal commission on long-term care recognised that this was a very serious position. In paragraph 4.30 of its report the royal commission said that it was aware that "preserved rights" rates of income support

"are becoming increasingly inadequate. Many of the people concerned are in increasingly difficult circumstances. As they survive longer, it seems increasingly difficult to justify treating this group of people differently from those who entered the care system on or after 1 April 1993, for whom local authorities meet fees in full, subject to a contribution based on means. Equity demands that they should be treated in the same way. We recommend that the Government should consider whether 'preserved rights' cases should be brought within the post-April 1993 system or whether some other solution can be found to address the shortfall in funding experienced by this group."

Of course I very much welcome the royal commission's recommendation, but its implementation is time critical. I share the disappointment expressed by hon. Members who have already spoken about what the Secretary of State said about his time scale for responding to the royal commission's report and introducing the legislation necessary to give effect to that response. As hon. Members have pointed out, we are promised a White Paper this summer, and, on that basis, we cannot even be sure that legislation will be forthcoming before this Parliament ends.

I can only try to bring home to the House just how time critical it is to deal with the outrageous situation that will exist as long as section 43 remains on the statute book unamended. I shall tell the House of the latest constituency case with which I have been dealing. My constituent is 96 years old. She is a widow. She has multiple infirmities, but she is sound of mind and therefore fully aware of what is going on around her. She has been living in a nursing home in my constituency since 1989—for the past 10 years—and her room there has become her home and her security. She is, by definition, one of the preserved rights cases on whom there is, under section 43, a total block on any financial support from local authority social services departments.

In August, my constituent's daughter and son-in-law came to see me with what for me has become an all too tragically familiar request. They found that the nursing home, faced with increased care costs for my constituent, was no longer able to cover those costs even with the higher rate of income support, and had said that there was no alternative but to have her forcibly removed from the home that she had been occupying for the past 10 years.

I brought the case to the attention of the Secretary of State, who said that there was nothing that he could do. I brought the case to the attention of the Kent director of social services, who took fresh legal advice and confirmed that the position was exactly as I have described it to the House: section 43 is totally inflexible and there are no circumstances in which it is legally possible for local authority social services departments to provide top-up funding, even when the individual concerned is facing eviction. He went on to say that he and all his care team considered that my constituent should remain in her home.

I am sorry to have to tell the House that my constituent's eviction took place yesterday, Wednesday 1 December. She was moved, forcibly, to a cheaper home where she no longer even has a room of her own. Earlier this morning, I rang my constituent's daughter. I wish that the whole House could have heard the conversation, because she could have conveyed the trauma of the situation and its impact on her mother far more eloquently that I possibly could. However, I took down what she said to me as best I could, and these are her words. She said:

"The move has been terribly, terribly distressing for my mother. When it was time for me to go, my mother took my arm and said, 'Please don't leave me. Please don't leave me. I want to go home.' To which I could only reply, 'Mother, this is now your home.' It was heartbreaking. I wish you people in Parliament could have been there."

It is a monumental disgrace that there is legislation on the statute book that results in infirm, elderly people who have made their lifetime's contribution to this society, have paid their taxes and national insurance contributions throughout their lives—and, in this generation, helped to see this country through a world war—being offered by the state at the end of their lives only the option of eviction from their home. I am deeply ashamed that such legislation has been passed and has so far remained unamended.

I hope that my sense of shame will be shared in all parts of the House. I am sure that no right hon. or hon. Member would want their constituents to face such treatment. I hope also that Ministers will take account of the fact that, while section 43 remained unamended in the four years between it coming into operation on 1 April 1993 and the general election in 1997, it remains unamended today. I hope that that is a matter of the utmost concern to the Secretary of State.

I shall end by making a proposal. I put the proposal forward not as a rhetorical gesture, but with the utmost seriousness and sincerity, believing that it can produce an immediate solution to the problem.

[Sir John Stanley]

We require an amendment to section 43 that would enable local authority social services departments to provide the necessary top-up funding to prevent an eviction taking place. I suggest to the Secretary of State that the situation calls for emergency legislative treatment, and I propose a short, simple legislative provision. I do not believe that any hon. Member in any part of the House can consider it acceptable that, at the end of this century, frail 96-year-old people are forcibly evicted from their home because the legislation provides no other option.

I have examined the legislation. It could conceivably be amended by secondary legislation but, assuming that that is not possible, the primary legislation required would not be more than two or three clauses. The House is perfectly able to deal quickly with emergency legislation. I am in no doubt that the legislation would receive all-party support. I have no doubt that such a two or three-clause Bill could go through the House in all its stages in a day, and through the other place also in a day. If the political will existed, that amending legislation could be on the statute book by Christmas.

That is the proposal that I put to the Secretary of State. It does not necessarily have to be the permanent solution. He may want to deal with the problem in a different way in his White Paper, but I implore the Government to recognise the seriousness and the unacceptability of the present situation, and to do something about it as a matter of urgency. While section 43 remains unamended, it is a shameful piece of legislation to be current in Britain at the end of the 20th century, and this House ultimately has the responsibility for amending it.

3.42 pm

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline; West): I, and I am sure other right hon. and hon. Members, share the deep sense of shame and disgrace so powerfully expressed by the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley). We must ask ourselves how our society has reached a point when elderly residents of homes that they have occupied for many years do not seem even to be covered by the United Nations convention on human rights.

Whatever system of funding long-term care is eventually decided on, I hope that we ensure that nothing similar can happen again. In the light of what the right hon. Gentleman told the House, I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to give serious consideration to the urgency of amending the legislation.

On the wider issue, I pay tribute to the royal commission for tackling so ably and effectively the subject of long-term care, and for producing an excellent report. I also pay tribute to the Government for establishing the royal commission so early in their term of office, and for showing a genuine commitment to tackling one of the most complex, sensitive and difficult areas of welfare reform.

I admit that, like many other hon. Members, I had hoped that it would be possible to have a full Government response to the report by now. However, I would much rather the Government took their time and made a full and comprehensive response than rushed to make an inadequate and problematic one. A properly considered resolution, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier when he outlined his timetable, is certainly in order, especially as we inherited a total mess from the previous Government of 18 years, who seem to have combined the closure of free NHS provision, such as Milesmark hospital in my constituency, with a massive increase in independent sector residential and nursing home care, much of it means-tested.

The previous Government also failed to deliver on community care. In its report to the royal commission, Alzheimer Scotland—Action on Dementia stated:

> "Figures show that community care has meant a redistribution of places between types of provision within the institutional sector, not an increased provision of the human resources necessary for successful domiciliary long term care."

Part of my anger with the present system is due to the fact that, too often, it does not allow a real choice between long-term care in one's own home and residential or nursing home care. Although I accept that that is not always a realistic option, all too frequently families and individuals have been pressured into accepting some form of institutionalised care.

All of us hope to end our days in our own home, and we as right hon. and hon. Members have a responsibility to do our utmost to make that possible for as many of our constituents as we can. However, our present funding system for long-term care, which combines a false division between health and social care with a lack of an integrated and diverse range of domiciliary services in many parts of the country, pushes people into institutional care. I make no criticism of much residential and nursing home care provision. I have such homes in my constituency which provide a high level of care and a decent life style, but they should not be the only option.

I welcome the Government's actions so far and their efforts to break the mould of institutional care and to promote the possibility of independence in one's own home—for example, the Government's special grant to local authorities of £293 million this year to support independent living at home for older people, and the improvement of services to carers through the allocation of £140 million over three years to fund respite care.

I welcome the announcement today of the publication of the long-term care charter setting out a national framework for improving housing, health and social services to promote independence. Those measures, combined with other Government action, such as the £100 winter fuel allowance, free television licences for over-75-year-olds, and the reduction to a 10p rate of income tax in savings from last April, all make it possible for more people to remain in their homes.

Those steps are all welcome, but we must tackle the crucial issue of who pays and for what when long-term care is needed. I urge the Government to consider carefully the recommendations of the royal commission on the funding of long-term care. That is seen by many of our constituents as one of the most important political decisions that the Government will make.

We have a moral responsibility to provide decency and dignity for the elderly, who are the majority, although not all, of those requiring long-term care. That is especially the case for the present elderly population who endured so much during the first half of the century to give our generation and subsequent generations greater opportunities and a better life style than they have had.

Today's pensioners believe that they deserve state-funded long-term care. They believe that they have paid for it through their taxes and national insurance

contributions. The majority believed that they had a responsibility to work hard, to pay tax and national insurance and to support their families, but they did so believing that, on their death, any savings that they had accumulated or assets that they had acquired could be passed on to their children and grandchildren. They believed that if they ever became ill and in need of full-time care, it would be provided without additional charge.

We are dealing here with a generation who accepted responsibility for their lives and those of their families. Even today, around 1 million do not claim benefits because they see them as charity. However, today's pensioners, certainly in my constituency, feel betrayed—a word that many have used to me, not just the political activists or members of the lobby groups with whom we all come into contact.

It is all very well for us to say that a two-tier system of free NHS care and means-tested social care has existed since Beveridge's reforms. That is true, but the majority of today's pensioners see it differently. Their view is that during their working lives they paid for long-term care in the event of their ever needing it. Until the previous Government, most long-term care was provided free in NHS long-stay beds, but during the past 20 years, thousands of those beds have been eliminated and replaced by means-tested care.

Particularly galling to pensioners who have worked and saved all their lives is that they now have to pay, whereas those with no assets or savings do not. If one of the Government's aims is to encourage people to save more and to make arrangements for an income in their retirement, we must consider carefully whether our eventual decision on long-term care will achieve that.

I urge the Government to recognise and deal with the crucial injustice highlighted by the royal commission that someone diagnosed with cancer receives care free of charge, while someone diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease is required to pay. Any action on long-term care funding must tackle that.

I appreciate that the cost implications are substantial, but for a number of reasons I urge the Government to be cautious in believing that they can offset the costs of long-term care to the state by going down the road of private insurance. First, the private insurance sector is not particularly interested in long-term care in general. It made that clear in its evidence to the royal commission. In the United States of America, that most privatised of care markets, only 5 per cent. of the population is insured against long-term care.

Secondly, I know from my own experience that private insurance companies are basically reluctant to provide any kind of cover to anyone with a blemished health record. Because I had a serious illness a few years ago, I, a Member of Parliament, have been refused insurance by private companies as large as Scottish Widows. It has now been five years since I had major surgery and radiotherapy, which is considered to be a bit of a guarantee that one will be around a bit longer yet, but if I sought long-term care insurance I would be required to pay a thumping price for it, which I would find difficult even on a Member of Parliament's salary, let alone the average family income. As a result, I believe that the private sector would cherry-pick and the state would end up carrying the majority of such costs. We need to take that into account.

We are finding it difficult to encourage people to save more and to put more into a second pension, so we must recognise the difficulty of persuading people to put money aside for an event which they hope will never happen—the need to leave their homes to go into some form of long-term care.

I welcome yesterday's announcement by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his St. Andrew's day speech on a joint action between the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the UK Parliament to tackle pensioner poverty. However, supporter as I am of devolution, any decision on the funding of long-term care must be UK-wide. It would not be right for pensioners in Dunfermline, Dorking and Denbigh to have different rules and regulations on the funding of long-term care.

Mr. Letwin: I have been reflecting on the hon. Lady's latest series of remarks and I am unclear whether she supports the position that I think we clarified was that of the Liberal Democrat's spokesman, that the state, and hence the present generation of taxpayers, should meet the full cost of long-term care for those in long-term care today regardless of their income or capital. Is that what she is saying?

Ms Squire: I am urging the Government to give serious consideration to the royal commission's recommendations on personal care and on that being free of charge. Today's pensioners deserve top priority in whatever money is available. I need to hear more of the arguments about whether that should apply to those of us who have a few years yet to retirement age. But we have a particular responsibility to today's pensioners because of what they went through and the expectations that they built up during their working lives.

I welcome Ministers' comments about the importance of recognising the contribution of carers to our society. Voluntary carers provide the largest amount of long-term care, free of cost or at low charge, estimated to be worth up to £40 billion a year. I hope that Government announcements next summer will recognise the role that carers play and ensure a system of full support for them.

I welcome today's debate, but I urge that we recognise in our decisions and in our future debates our moral obligation to today's pensioners that long-term care funding should be universal. We must tackle the false division that exists between health and social care and, all too often nowadays, between nursing and residential care. We must meet the needs of carers as well as users, and ensure decency, dignity and independence. The awful circumstances of the 96-year-old that the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling described must never occur again.

4 pm

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to a debate on the important subject of long-term care, and to consider the recommendations in the royal commission's report and the points made in the note of dissent. However, I must point out, as other hon. Members have done, that people inside and outside Parliament have expressed grave disappointment because the Government have not made decisions on all the report's recommendations, although

[Mrs. Marion Roe]

they were published in March—nine months ago. The Government have still not declared their position on future policy.

The royal commission's report is not the first report on long-term care to be presented to the House of Commons. When I was chairman of the Select Committee on Health, it held two inquiries into long-term care. One related to national health service responsibilities for meeting continuing health care need, and was published in November 1995. The other covered the future provision and funding of long-term care, and was published in July 1996. Both reports were unanimous and provided the initial investigation into and detailed analysis of a highly complex and controversial issue. Therefore, I speak as somebody who has taken an interest in the subject for a long time.

What is the question to which answers are required now? Population forecasts up to the middle of the next century are relatively reliable. Unfortunately, future demand for long-term care is dependent not only on the size of the elderly population but, crucially, on much more unpredictable factors such as the number of people who live alone and the health status of the elderly. Of course, the latter depends on developments that cannot be foreseen, such as the extent of medical progress and the degree to which healthier life styles are adopted. Therefore, all attempts to calculate future demand towards the end of the lifetimes of those who are not young will contain an element of crystal ball gazing; I think that statisticians call it "an expanding funnel of doubt".

I endorse the royal commission's view that there are no immediate demographic time bombs for long-term care; the demographic and dependency ratio trends suggest that no major problems loom in the short to medium term—that is, up to around 2020. After that, the trends will present more of a challenge and we should consider their implications now.

It is right that any changes to present models of care and methods of financing long-term care should conform to seven key principles. First, any changes should maximise the individual's independence, self-respect and choice. At the heart of any system should be encouragement of independence and autonomy for the individual, and provision of reasonable opportunity for people to choose the type and setting of the long-term care that they require. It is also important that the system is sensitive to the particular needs of ethnic and religious minorities.

Secondly, any changes should be understandable and perceived as equitable. There is a widely held perception that the current arrangements for funding long-term care lack fairness.

Thirdly, any changes should improve the way in which long-term care is planned, organised and purchased by multidisciplinary, knowledge-based agencies. The community care reforms are based on the aspiration for services to be purchased and provided to suit the needs of the individual rather than the interests of service providers. Therefore, good information is required on the needs of individuals and local populations, and on the effectiveness of the varying forms of long-term care services, including, for example, preventive and rehabilitative services.

Fourthly, any changes should provide better support and encouragement to informal carers, in terms of practical help—for example, training and respite care—or financial help. Informal care is, and will remain for the foreseeable future, the bedrock of long-term care provision. Given the potential for changing demographic and other social trends to reduce the supply of informal carers, there is a strong argument for ensuring that priority is given to changes that will improve the ability and willingness of informal carers to provide care.

Fifthly, any changes should include mechanisms to ensure that an efficient and high-quality service is provided in all care settings. Long-term care services are often provided to clients, who, by the nature of their conditions, are vulnerable. Therefore, it is clearly important that mechanisms are in place to ensure high-quality services in all care settings.

Sixthly, changes should be affordable. Public support for changes is likely to be forthcoming only if they are seen to be affordable by individuals as well as the state. Any movement towards a system of long-term care that is "funded" as opposed to "pay-as-you-go" should recognise that one generation would be expected to contribute twice—for its own future care and for the care needs of today's elderly people. I believe that any such change would need to be phased in over a long period in order to be affordable and acceptable to the transitional generation.

Seventhly, any new programme of public expenditure on long-term care should, in the case of services provided or funded by the national health service, be—as it is now—available equally to all citizens according to their assessed need for care and, in the case of means-tested social care services, be designed to meet necessary care need for citizens who have insufficient income or capital to pay for such care from their own resources. We all listened carefully to the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) about his constituent, with whom we have great sympathy.

What are the options for funding long-term care? It is apparent that long-term care is an expensive service for the taxpayer and for any individual who contributes towards the cost of his or her care. As I said earlier, there is a perceived unfairness in the current system for financing long-term care by means testing state-supported residents in residential or nursing homes. That approach penalises people who have saved during their working life, while rewarding with free care those who have been unable, or unwilling, to save. It is grossly unfair to the thrifty, because it represents a disincentive to save and a challenge to those able to divest themselves of capital. If we are to build a more secure society, we should encourage people to help themselves and to be independent, if possible, through saving carefully for their old age. Thrift should be encouraged and assisted, not undermined.

Surely it must be right to find a way for the state to work with those who are prudent and not against them. For example, partnership schemes give additional protection of assets against a means test when it is applied. We must not forget that society as a whole has become wealthier and the substantial increase in the number of elderly people who own their own homes means that many people have assets significantly above those specified in the means-tested threshold. If that is

coupled with the fact that people are, on average, living longer, the disquiet on that issue can be understood. I therefore fully support the Conservative party's policy whereby, if individuals make provision for themselves, the Government will protect more of their assets should that provision run out and they need to use state-funded care.

It is important that as many options for future funding of long-term care as possible should be considered and assessed. The partnership schemes are only part of an overall package that may include other mechanisms such as immediate need annuities, long-term care insurance, equity release schemes, geared pensions and tax relief as well as schemes founded on general taxation or social insurance such as those in Germany. As we know, state expenditure on long-term care in the United Kingdom is currently funded on a pay-as-you-go basis, which would mean—bearing in mind the changing demographic profile and, in particular, the changes in the dependency ratios—that such schemes could ultimately become too expensive for the country as a whole to afford. I wait, with great interest, to learn exactly where the Government are going on that crucial question of financing.

I shall now discuss the caring services that should be provided. There is no doubt that examples of good practice in the provision of long-term care should be publicised more widely and that there is a need to expand the scope and quality of domiciliary, rehabilitative and respite care. In my view, that would benefit the individuals concerned and be likely to be more cost-effective for the funding authorities. Greater attention should also be paid to the need to improve housing facilities for the elderly and the disabled and to achieving more effective liaison between housing, social services and health authorities.

Housing improvements can offer a happy conjunction of cost-effectiveness for the providing authorities and improved quality of life for those who inhabit the housing. It is important that housing services fully exploit their potential for contributing to the Government's community care objectives, particularly with regard to the development of very sheltered housing schemes and ensuring that ordinary sheltered housing schemes are attractive to current and future generations of users. For example, account should be taken of the wider development of collaborative schemes such as those in respect of community care alarms.

We are all aware of the anomaly whereby it is possible to receive free nursing care in some situations but not others. Nursing care is free in hospital and at home, but citizens pay for it if they have to go into a nursing home. That creates all sorts of barriers to achieving seamless care. However, the cost implications of any changes to that situation must be taken into account for any comprehensive provision of nursing care. A number of colleagues have commented on those implications, and again I await with interest the Government's decision on an important issue.

I should also like to raise the question of under-resourcing by social services departments for independent sector placements and the resulting pressure that that is putting on the sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) has already commented on that issue. There is no doubt that many people who have been assessed as needing residential care are being forced to wait on a waiting list while some local authorities persist in wasting money on direct provision of care that is often more than 60 per cent. more expensive to provide than comparable or even better care provided by the independent sector. Surely that cannot be an acceptable way to proceed and I should like the Minister to tell the House what action he is taking to stop that practice.

As chairman of the all-party hospice group, I should like to make a plea on behalf of the hospice movement and its involvement in long-term care. The Department of Health, in circular EL(96)85, stated that the palliative care approach should be integrated into the routine clinical practice of all health care professionals in the NHS. The hospice movement believes that that principle and policy objective should be extended to all long-term care in the private and voluntary sectors.

The Government's proposals for regulating private and voluntary health care present an opportunity to introduce new national standards for nursing homes and one of those standards could be that the staff in nursing and residential homes are trained in palliative care. The voluntary hospices and NHS specialist palliative care units are well placed to lead the development of education and training for nursing and residential home staff in the palliative care approach, provided that they are resourced to do so. Some nursing homes already seek out and pay for such training, but all need to be encouraged to do so through the introduction of training and staff development standards. The professional carers of those in long-term care need to be able to access the specialist advice and support of the community-based hospice and specialist palliative care services. They need to know in what circumstances to seek specialist advice. Education, and perhaps the development of locally-agreed procedures for assessing such advice, would assist in that.

Finally, whatever the outcome of the Government's deliberations, may I draw the Minister's attention to, first, the importance of public awareness of the issues and choices involved? After all, the decisions will affect every one of us. Secondly, I remind him of the current Health Committee observations on the issue:

> "There is a consensus that the status-quo is unacceptable. Failure by the Government to act urgently would be a serious dereliction of duty".

4.18 pm

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): Like other Members, I welcome the debate as an opportunity to discuss important issues concerning the care of our elderly citizens. How we care for them must surely be a clear marker as to what kind of society we are and what values we hold dear, and there are many examples of excellent care, both in residential homes and families.

Families often struggle with difficult conditions and circumstances and have access to far too few resources and support systems. Carers of dependent relatives are nothing short of heroes and heroines who work hard and make great personal sacrifices to give their loved ones all the attention that they need and deserve. We all owe those individuals a great debt: not only do they help us to believe that we live in a caring society, but they save us all a great deal of money by endeavouring to care for elderly relatives and partners at home.

It is, therefore, only right and proper that the Government are improving services to carers by allocating £140 million to help to fund respite care. I welcome

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that measure, which is a good step in the right direction. Of course it is not enough; we want more. I also pay tribute to those who devote effort, enthusiasm and commitment to making some residential homes beacons of excellence. They are the shining light in what I believe to be a murky world of neglect and, on occasion, abuse.

I had the great honour, as a Back Bencher, of being the Member in charge of what has become the Protection of Children Act 1999. The Act contains mechanisms to help protect children from abusers. During the Bill's passage, I was approached by numerous colleagues who wanted the protection offered to children by my Bill to be extended to elderly people. I also received numerous pleas from people all over the country who begged me to help elderly relatives or friends who had been consigned to leading what I would describe as a dehumanised existence. I was given many examples of neglect and, in some cases, abuse.

It was with immense sadness that I had to dash the hopes of those desperate people. I had to tell them that, as a Back Bencher, I had limited means at my disposal, and could not extend the powers contained in the Protection of Children Act. Ministers, however, do have the means and the powers. I hope that the Minister of State will be able to tell us about any measures that he can take to make it a statutory responsibility for all who work with elderly people to be vetted, and, if found to be abusers, prevented from working with them. I also hope that my hon. Friend will find ways in which to tackle the numerous instances of neglect.

I welcome the proposals for a new regulatory system, and the development of a set of national standards through the national care commission. I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to say something about how the standards will be enforced, what sanctions will be imposed against those who fall short of them, and how the standards will be policed. On the basis of the evidence I have been given, I firmly believe that fully accredited lay visitors with powers to enter residential homes at any time of day or night must be part of any monitoring scheme. Only unscheduled spot visits will capture the sort of neglect that is currently prevalent in residential homes for the elderly.

Carlton's "Thirty Minutes" programme recently sent an undercover reporter to a number of residential homes in the west midlands, where I come from. The broadcast that resulted featured none of the headline-grabbing shock stories that require immediate action—someone being sacked or prosecuted, or both. What it did reveal was constant, pernicious neglect: neglect that can be described as institutionalised. There seemed to be little comprehension among those being filmed that the ways in which elderly people were being treated were, quite simply, wrong.

For example, an elderly woman was left lying, for a considerable time, on the floor in a communal area where she posed a danger not only to herself but to other residents. She was also denied dignity. The programme also revealed poor standards of hygiene, and the incorrect administering of drugs. A reporter seeking work in a residential home was not asked for a reference, and no checks were made on her suitability. It is a measure of the complete lack of any sort of proper employment practice that on one occasion she was not even asked for her home address before being allowed to start work; she was simply allowed to work with vulnerable, dependent elderly people who relied on her for their care and well-being. Given such poor employment practices, is it any surprise that our elderly people are neglected and abused?

Neglect, however, is even more far-reaching than that. Our elderly people are often subjected to regimes that, on occasion, defy human rights. There are examples of elderly people being woken and dressed at 5.30 am because that suited the shifts of the employees, and of elderly people being forced to go to bed early in the evening—perhaps at 6.30 pm—because that, too, suited the staff. That reminds me of a prison regime, rather than a home. It does not make me think of a place of safety, warmth and care. Dragooning people into behaviour patterns better suited to a penal institution is no way to treat our elders, and if we continue to allow it that will say as much about us as it says about those who perpetrate such regimes.

In fact, it says much about us that we can allow elderly people to lead the remainder of their lives sitting in an armchair with little to stimulate, interest or entertain them. What kind of society is it that turns and looks away because the problem is difficult to solve, or because it is inconvenient to take action?

I have visited residential homes in my Stourbridge constituency, which is a delightful place to live. It has pleasant surroundings, working practices that ensure dignity and respect for residents and activities that provide companionship and interest. Those homes are good places, but many others are not. I plead with the Minister to act as a matter of urgency to raise standards in residential homes. There is a vital need for an independent agency to inspect homes. Can the Minister tell us whether there is a proposed date for such an agency to become operational? Failure to act would be a national disgrace.

Let me deal briefly with the funding of residential care. My Stourbridge constituents have raised the issue with me at two public meetings, and on numerous occasions individually. Their comments show a lack of trust in the present system. Many people are unclear about what to expect for their relatives and, looking a little into the future, for themselves. I think that their fears are understandable. The last Government left the system in a mess, and it is up to the present Government to take urgent and serious action.

The last Government failed to offer support to elderly people and their carers to help the elderly to stay in their own homes—something that most people want. They also encouraged the creation of an independent residential care sector without introducing the checks and balances that were necessary.

Miss Kirkbride: One thing that can be said of the last Government is that we introduced the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990, which allowed people to stay in their own homes—*[Interruption.]*

Ms Shipley: That comment has provoked a good deal of sedentary dissent. Certainly, if the necessary measures were in place to safeguard elderly people, we should not need to take the steps outlined earlier by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

As I was saying, residential homes need checks and balances which are certainly not there at present. I look to the present Government to introduce them as a matter

of urgency. Furthermore, as has already been said, people were pressurised to sell their homes as soon as they entered care. That meant that, if their health improved, they would have no homes to return to. That is clearly a deplorable and very sad situation.

I believe that the Government's proposals to keep as many people in their own homes as possible for as long as possible is what the vast majority want, and must be properly supported. Most of my constituents tell me that they want to stay in their own homes, looked after by their relatives in the first instance, and moving into residential care only later, if that proves necessary. Individuals, however, must be free to choose the living conditions that provide best for their needs, and must be able to plan financially to meet the choices that they make.

My constituents are realistic. They realise that long-term residential care costs a great deal. The royal commission estimated that free personal care would cost around £1 billion a year. My constituents realise that funding for a high-standard programme of care will have to be provided in a variety of ways, but they want it to be fair funding. We urgently need a better funding system for elderly people who need residential care, and it must be fair and be seen to be fair. Vitally, it must be sustainable over a long period, so that people can plan to meet their own needs and those of their families. I should be pleased to hear from the Minister how he will ensure that those with modest amounts of capital are not hit hardest when they come to fund their care.

I welcome the fact that the Government have honoured their election commitment to publish a charter for long-term care. It is important that, for the first time, people will have access to information that they need: they need to know what they can expect from local services.

To be elderly and vulnerable is difficult. To be fearful as well is totally unacceptable. We have a duty to offer high standards of care to the elderly and to build a new system that is transparent, sustainable and offering choice and quality. When we have done that, we will have earned the trust of the elderly and their carers—a trust that was destroyed by the Conservatives.

4.30 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I follow the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley), having served with her in seeking to bring the Protection of Children Act 1999 into being. As she spoke, I thought of long-term care for children with handicaps and the proposals for means-testing income with regard to the house that they might need.

A person wrote to me from the Foyle constituency urging me to bear it in mind that means testing was unnecessary because those who had the funds would go ahead. They were not prepared to wait for things to happen, whereas those who did not have the money or facilities required immediate help.

On long-term funding, the hon. Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire) reminded us all of the problem of relying merely on insurance provision. I know that we are all glad that she has done the five-year sentence and look forward to her presence in the House for many more years.

From the poignant contribution of the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley), we all learned a lesson. It was the House of Commons that passed the legislation in question. A Government of whom he had been a supporter, if not a member, brought it before the House. The tragedy is that, often, in passing legislation, we do not think about its impact on the community out there. It is a salutary lesson that we should bear in mind.

There is much excellent care and provision for the elderly, but the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling reminded us of the old saying that we are living in a generation of people who know the price of everything and the value of nothing. I have had to deal with young colleagues in the ministry who thought that paying attention to young people was all that mattered. I used to tell them to be careful. I told them that, if young people saw them ignoring their parents because they were concentrating on them, the parents could suddenly say, "Can we rely on them to look after us when we get older?" The Government have to look at the whole span. We may look for support from the younger generation, but we should also care for the older generation.

I am a little concerned. We welcome the fact that, as of today, Northern Ireland has devolution, but I am not convinced by some proposals. I understand the Secretary of State's view that the standards should be for England, but in my view, they should be for the whole kingdom. We should all have the same standards to aspire to. I hope that there will be not the lowest, but the highest common denominator—something that we build on, rather than trying to get away with what we can.

We have to bear it in mind that human beings look after themselves to a large extent. I am reminded of a person who did not live in my constituency, but who looked after her parents. Then, after years of caring for them, she required a break. She went on holiday. Her parents were looked after by her brother and sister-in-law, who suddenly discovered that it upset the routine of their home, so they put the parents in a residential home.

When the daughter came back, she was heartbroken, especially when she saw the conditions at the home, but it was the brother who had put the parents in. The authorities hid behind that fact.

We complained about the conditions at the home. The authorities replied that the home had a clean bill of health and that the general practitioner who was responsible for it had said that it was all right. Ultimately, they closed it: we were right and they were wrong. The GP was receiving a retainer fee of £3,000 a year to say that it was all right. We have to deal with human nature and to provide the standards that our people expect in relation to long-term care in the community.

There is a division between health and social care. Again, we have to be careful. Some time back, legislation was passed that did not permit local authorities in England to purchase provision outside England.

We had an interesting development. As we all know, we are a mobile people. People come to England to work from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. I think of an individual who spent many years in England working. Then he was incapacitated and put into a home. No one around there really knew him. Cousins and others in Fermanagh would have been delighted to have him close to them, so that they could give him some back-up. Although the provision there was cheaper for the local authority and better for him, it was not allowed in law to purchase the provision to allow that person to go back to

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his native heath, where family would be around to help him. In legislating, we have to be careful that we do not get so parochial that we hive off the different regions, forgetting that we are one common family.

I make a plea about financing and the concept of preserved rights. A voluntary home that was started by a Church of Ireland rector for people with profound learning difficulties has been going for some 25 years. It never had a ha'penny from the state to help with capital or running costs. Different authorities purchased its places, which have been kept at a certain limit.

The clergyman concerned has run voluntary efforts, raising, for example, £70,000 last year primarily to increase patient comfort and to give those people the quality of life that he believes they should have as human beings; but he cannot run the home on the amount that is received through purchase of the provision by the different boards—12 places with preserved rights were purchased by the Department of Health and Social Services. That is happening throughout the country. We have to re-examine it, so that we deal with people according to their needs.

We speak of community care. Is the problem affecting just Northern Ireland, or is it affecting other areas? One of the difficulties for people who would love to remain in their homes is that the adaptations required in their homes are so long in coming that they think that they will be dead before they get them.

One of the weaknesses is that occupational therapists' waiting lists are so long that they prioritise. I have asked how they prioritise. It seems that, as people come in, they add them to the list. That is not proper prioritisation, although it might seem fair.

A constituent of mine, a woman of 90, is blind. Her sister of 84 has a severe back problem. The OT said that they could handle the heater—one of those solid fuel things. I tried to move the thing myself. I know a little about fires and plumbing because that was my father's trade. My first Sunday work was helping him to do some maintenance work at the York street spinning mill. An 84-year-old with a back condition was expected to cope with the heater by herself. Then we were told that the problem was that there was no gas in the area. We knew that. The nearest gas point was two miles away, but no one wanted to put the oil in.

Having fought the good fight, the ladies now have a measure of comfort, but they should not have had to fight that good fight and a Member of Parliament should not have to act in that way. The servants of the state should at least be aware of human needs and should seek to help rather than sticking to red tape.

I understand the financial pressures on the Government when considering long-term provision for the elderly, but tell that to people who read about the billions of pounds in the national insurance fund. They wonder what it is there for if not to provide for the generation who were partly responsible for amassing it.

4.41 pm

Ms Ann Coffey (Stockport): I congratulate the members of the royal commission on the work that they put into producing their report, which deals with some difficult and complex issues for today and tomorrow. Those issues deserve consideration. I also welcome the Government's announcement of the establishment of a national care commission, which will regulate and improve standards nationally. That is long overdue.

I welcome the royal commission's call for the modernisation of long-term care in a framework of fairness, recognising that that involves shared responsibilities between the individual and the state. Funding arrangements should be affordable, sustainable and fair to present and future generations of older and working people.

Older people are not a homogenous group. With today's increased life expectancy, they are not even all of the same generation. The people we call pensioners can range in age from 65 to 90. That covers different generations with different life experiences that have shaped different attitudes. Every one of them is an individual with his or her own life story, successes, failures, family experiences and financial circumstances. In recognition of that, the commission emphasises that older people are contributors to society. They are carers, members of voluntary organisations, and neighbours who do a good turn for each other. Some of them have part-time work, but they are also enjoyers of society—they use leisure facilities, they go to the cinema, the theatre and the pub down the road and they go walking. They want the same opportunities as the working-age population. The Government must ensure that they have them. That is why I welcome the better government for older people initiative, which shares that view of older people.

Being old should not take away the right to be treated fairly or the right to exercise choice, but neither should it take away the responsibility to contribute. The royal commission considered the funding of long-term care, looking at elderly people's expectations for dignity and security and the constraints of public funds. That is the agenda of rights and responsibilities.

In looking at funding issues and sustainability and affordability, the commission tried to take a long-term view, while admitting the difficulty of that. The future is more unpredictable than ever, because we need not only to take into account medical advances, economic changes and the impact of technology, but to try to predict people's expectations and behaviour in 50 years. The challenge of the next century will be to maintain social cohesion. We need to hold together the rights of the individual and the expectation that we all have to control our lives and exercise choices with the responsibilities that we each have to others in a fair society. That can involve contributing financially for the good of others and limitations on our personal freedom. That is a tension in any democratic society.

I shall judge one of the royal commission's main recommendations on the criterion of fairness and balancing everybody's rights and responsibilities, examining whether it achieves a partnership between the state and the individual and, most importantly, whether it targets resources while ensuring that everybody gets a first-class service. The recommendation is that personal care, whether in a residential setting or in the home, should be provided free of charge irrespective of people's income, but that housing and living costs should continue to be means-tested and paid for by general taxation on the basis of an assessment of need.

In arriving at its recommendation, the commission commented on two general resentments from the public against an expectation that the welfare state should provide from the cradle to the grave, including care. There is resentment that some get for free that for which others, because of thrift, have to pay. It is also generally perceived as unfair that some are forced to sell their house and what they regard as their children's inheritance to pay for long-term care.

Residential care has never been free. It has always been means-tested. Before the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990, when older people decided that they needed nursing or residential care, the Department of Social Security provided a grant if they did not have the resources to support themselves. That means test has been applied to my certain knowledge for 20 years. I applied it as a social worker in 1971 and it still exists. For 20 years, people have been liable to lose their homes if the means test shows that they have sufficient resources. That is nothing new.

The argument for means-testing is that it is a good form of targeting resources on those in need. However, older people, particularly the poor, have powerful memories of the means test of the poor laws, when means-testing was synonymous with descent to the workhouse and was a mark of shame. I do not accept the argument that it stops people saving, which is the new argument against means-testing. People save because they want the choice that saving brings, and the independence that it provides. Of course there are people who do not save, but there are also people who cannot save because, during their working lives, they have not had the means.

The royal commission's main recommendation is free personal care. It provides for a partnership between the state and the individual. Housing and living costs would be the individual's responsibility, after means-testing. Personal care would be provided irrespective of income. It certainly creates equal treatment, but the problem is that that effectively passes the funding of the current private provision into the public sector, without one extra bit of care or improvement in care being provided. That does not deal with the savings issue, because people would still have to sell their homes to pay for their living and housing costs when they get below the capital limit. For domiciliary care, there are practical problems of implementation.

One of those problems would be that, at the moment, we have the attendance allowance, a direct payment for care needs which people can choose to spend as they wish—on care, on paying home helps or paying informal carers to do tasks for them. It gives them the choice. Logically, if one accepts the royal commission's recommendation, the attendance allowance for care costs would have to be withdrawn, so the choice would be taken away from the elderly. That would not be popular.

There is an argument over what constitutes social care and health care, and it has been raging for several years—particularly when changes in technology or in what professionals do change the boundaries. However, the argument over what constitutes personal care—which the royal commission defines as being care which involves touching people—and what constitutes indirect care is also difficult. In accepting the royal commission's argument about making personal care free, we would not escape the difficulties of deciding where the boundary is, or about what should be paid for and what should not. It simply puts that into another area.

The National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 wanted to develop alternatives to residential care and to increase choice for older people. The evidence is that community care has increased, but the concern is that provision is pooled for those with greater care needs. One can hardly be surprised about that. There are arguments about the importance of early intervention—in domestic help and other support—to enable people to retain their independence. There is concern that those sort of services are disappearing.

If the royal commission's recommendation is accepted, it would make the position worse because personal care would be free and the kind of domestic help which people describe as important would be subject to a means test. Those on low incomes would not then have the attendance allowance to enable them to pay. It might have the opposite effect to what is intended.

The main difficulty I have with the recommendation is that free personal care would not provide any extra care—even in the community or in the home—and would not benefit those on low incomes, as they already have free provision. More importantly, public funds would be diverted from raising standards in homes, which I believe to be a matter of priority, the essence of social justice, and fundamental to decent care for all our elderly. That is the essential fairness that old people, whatever their situation, need and deserve. They deserve and need good quality domiciliary and residential care, and we have not got there yet. It requires money—it requires public funds and investment. I believe that if public funds are available, that is where they should be directed as a priority.

There is an issue of how care is paid for. There must be a partnership between the state and the individual. However, I do not believe that free personal care achieves that partnership. The system could be made fairer, and could achieve a better balance between the benefits that people get from their savings and the contributions they then have to make from their own resources. The case has been well made.

The Government could look at freeing up equity schemes where older people might have choice about how they use their capital resources to fund long-term care. I do not believe that there is one solution, and we need a range of options to enable people to have choices and to make plans about how they fund long-term care. A multiplicity of provision would enable people to make those choices. I believe that they would welcome that.

I welcome the White Paper "Modernising Social Services" and the Government's intention to regulate, to have independent inspection, to encourage flexibility in the provision of care and to introduce nationally required standards which all homes will have to meet and from which all people would benefit. That is making progress on the road to social justice for the elderly.

I welcome the Government's intention to legislate for joint budgets, which will help the development of community care. It is an exciting proposal. I have noticed the feeling of excitement in my constituency at the possibility of working across agency boundaries and at being able to achieve a common objective without being constrained by an agency. As the legislation stands, it is still constraining. Legislation that allowed joint budgets

[Ms Ann Coffey]

would release a lot of creative talent among the people working in the agencies, and I have seen an example of what can be achieved by working in that manner. Last year, a hospital—not one in my constituency—used some of the winter pressures money to employ a social worker in the casualty department. That social worker worked with a nurse and, when elderly people were admitted to casualty after a fall or some other accident, all the outside agencies were involved to try to return them home as soon as possible—which is what they wanted.

I hope that such initiatives will be carried further after the legislation for joint budgets. When I was in the casualty ward of the hospital I mentioned, I noticed how many elderly people were admitted after falls. As we all know, this is the time of year when the leaves fall from the trees and make the pavements difficult to walk on. Clearing pavements of leaves tends to be bottom of a local authority's priorities, but it could result in huge savings for health authorities. Under joint budget arrangements, perhaps health authorities could pass some money to local authorities which could sweep up the streets so that nobody would fall. That seems to be a simple answer to the problem, but it cannot happen at the moment. The Government's legislation would allow it to happen and would have a huge impact on the way in which agencies work together and the value for money provided. Millions of pounds is spent in each of our constituencies and we can all think of ways in which it could be better spent. The artificial boundaries between agencies is one factor that prevents that from happening.

Dr. Palmer: Does my hon. Friend agree that the process works both ways? For example, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence is considering whether treatment for multiple sclerosis will enable social services to reduce the amount of care they need to provide. Joint planning of social services and health could mean money flowing both ways, rather than one donating it to the other. I understand that some counties in Sweden have carried out successful experiments of that kind.

Ms Coffey: I am sure that all hon. Members could give further examples, not to mention the people who work in those agencies. The freeing up of that creativity will have a major impact on the quality of life for the people they work with.

I welcome the announcements by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State because they will make important progress towards improving quality of service for older people, and I look forward to more announcements to come.

4.58 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): We have just heard a fascinating speech from the hon. Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey), who has previous professional experience and who, in her current position as a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department of Social Security, might have had a glancing involvement in some of the Government's discussions—

Ms Coffey *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Kirkwood: I accept that that was not the case. I am not saying that the hon. Lady was not the author of her own speech, because she spoke with passion and brought experience to the argument. My point was that it was interesting that she and my close friend, Lord Lipsey—who was the author of the main part of the dissenting note in the royal commission's report—have come to roughly the same conclusion.

The arguments made by the hon. Lady sought to attack the main recommendation of the royal commission, and Lord Lipsey, who has good contacts at all levels in the Government, took the same view. I fear that they may have predicted what we are going to get, and the hon. Lady's speech may have been the most honest of the afternoon. The argument is between the main and the dissenting points of view, and I can tell the Minister that I am happy to engage in that argument. However, I am grateful that he cleared up the point on which the Secretary of State left me in some doubt.

The Secretary of State certainly left some doubt in my mind about what the Government intend to do. However, there is certainly no doubt in my mind that the royal commission's report is an excellent and ground-breaking piece of work, not just for its volume of recommendations but for its three volumes of appendices. I sat down last summer and read it all. I must admit that that was the first time in my parliamentary career that I have read a report all the way through. Although I have forgotten much of it—my excuse is that the Government have taken so long to stage this debate—I learned a lot from it and it certainly repays careful study.

I hope that we will not concentrate solely on the recommendations as that would not do justice to the work that went into the report, which was done in a very short time by a group of exceptional people. We shall not do their work justice if we concentrate on the political points that have been discussed today, important though they are.

When it came out, the report received a disappointingly dusty response from the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). If today's statement had been made nine weeks after its publication, I for one would have been delighted and would have said that it provided something for us to work on. I should have been happy to enter into some of the discussions that must take place.

However, a gap of nine months between the publication of the royal commission's report and today's announcement is too long. We have lost quite a lot of time. A White Paper will be published in the summer. In his report, Sir Stewart Sutherland said that many of the royal commission's recommendations could be implemented without primary legislation. However, given the three-year departmental spending review, the Government have no realistic chance of achieving in this Parliament the primary legislation needed to establish the care commission and the necessary reform of the funding system.

I welcome much of what the Government are doing. I was a fellow Lib-Lab co-conspirator with the former leader of my party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), but I do not keep diaries, so the Government need not worry about any revelations that I might make. However, although I think that the Government are doing much good work, I do not think that it will now be possible to deal with these matters properly until the next Parliament.

It is legitimate for the Government to say that they tried to deal with a previously intractable problem by setting up a royal commission. I was prepared to accept that at

the last election, but at the next election the Government will be saying that the response to the White Paper will come in the Parliament to follow. The process of delay will continue, with the result that the momentum will slip seriously. That is to be regretted.

I believe passionately that to do justice to the report, the House has to decide whether the hon. Member for Stockport is right, or whether I am right. That key question must be decided. If we do not find the necessary funds, a huge opportunity will be missed.

The hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) made an excellent speech. He has much experience in these matters. The trends in the national insurance fund must be examined. We must be a little careful about the idea that the fund has a surplus of £12 billion. That is easily said, and £12 billion sounds like a lot of money. However, the Government Actuary believes that if current trends prevail, there will be the possibility that the level of individual contributions to the national insurance fund could be reduced.

As the hon. Member for Stockport knows better than most, there is a projected underspend at the Department of Social Security of about £7 billion over the next three years. The Select Committee on Health looked into the matter and was quite robust about how the necessary funds should be secured.

Sir Stewart Sutherland has himself suggested recently that increasing inheritance tax could provide a potential source of additional revenue, although it clearly would not be able to realise the whole cost of £1 billion. In that context, it is not helpful to talk about an end cost of £50 billion in 50 years. Of course one has to be prudent, but it does not further the argument to talk about Monopoly money figures such as that, which are totally meaningless.

I do not doubt that the sums of money involved are large, nor that such matters must be considered very carefully, but the reaction of the great British public should also be taken into account. I hope that the Minister will look at the British social attitudes survey that was published recently. The copy that I have ordered has not arrived yet so I am quoting from press reports, but the survey apparently makes it clear that a significant majority of British people want more money to be spent on education, health and the long-term care of the elderly—even if that means increased taxes. The survey also states:

"people still favour public rather than private or voluntary provision".

That is what the focus groups tell pollsters. I do not know why the Labour party is not picking this up. It has a national network of focus groups. Some of these questions should be put through that process. People do not want to pay taxes for nothing, in a profligate, unfocused way. However, I bet a monkey to a mousetrap that if the question were properly constructed and taken to a properly constituted focus group that was told what we would have to spend to achieve our end, we would get a majority. We would need to promote the argument but we could win a majority in favour of moving in the direction that I have described in the longer term. If the Government were prepared to do that, I would support them.

The current system is not fair. If any hon. Member doubted it, Sir Stewart Sutherland's royal commission demonstrated it beyond peradventure. The system is unjust and insufficient. Eloquent speeches from hon. Members of all parties made that point. The right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) made one of the most powerful speeches that I have heard for a long time. I am sorry to keep referring to her, but the hon. Member for Stockport may have a role in this. The long title of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill that was published yesterday suggests that it might admit of a new clause that could deal with preserved rights and section 43 of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990. Can she write that down and take it to the Department? If she does not get an answer soon, we will start tabling written questions. The right hon. Gentleman's speech deserves some positive response. I will happily sign up to such a new clause if he succeeds in tabling one.

We all have constituency stories and I want to mention my local circumstances to underscore the urgency of getting something done. Starting from now, with a White Paper in the summer, it will take at least two or three years before we get beneficial outcomes that change things on the ground. Some 70 or 80 families in my region of south-east Scotland face terrible decisions each year about selling their houses to pay the costs of long-term care.

The hon. Member for Stockport is wrong to say that the main majority recommendation would not produce new resources. Nor is she right to say that it is simply a question of this always being the system. When the current system was introduced in 1948—she is right that as a social worker in 1971, she was applying it—people were not paying as much as £1,600 a month in long-term care costs or living to 96. Events on the ground have overtaken available provision. If we do not recognise that, it will be another 10 years before we do anything about it. I find that an intolerable prospect. Thankfully, I have never had an eviction from a home take place before my eyes. I hope that it never happens, but it is a real and corrosive problem.

The hon. Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire) spoke well. She has had a good track record on the subject in her time in the House. Trying to talk people through the implications of care costs is corrosive. People end up feeling let down, if not, as she eloquently said, betrayed. That is happening in the borders now. I checked before the debate and found that 28 NHS beds are blocked. What does it cost to leave 28 people languishing in long-term NHS hospital wards when they could perfectly well be put in residential nursing places in south-east Scotland? The care homes are all full up. If we multiply those local figures to a national level, we would find that such care costs a fortune. We cannot ignore those costs lightly.

Several hon. Members mentioned respite care. The Government allocated £140 million for carers, which will be most helpful. Although it has not yet started feeding through the system, it is a step in the right direction. I endorse the eloquent and passionate plea made by the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley) on that matter. In the borders, we do not have the means to take the pressure off, for example, families who have to deal with youngsters with multiple disabilities. Those families are deeply affected and concerned. Science enables some of those young people to outlive their parents. It is devastating for parents to know that when they die, they will bequeath the state a complex set of different

[Mr. Kirkwood]

problems, and they cannot even receive a little respite care to enable them to pick a way through their domestic difficulties.

By the summer—between now and the publication of the White Paper on this subject—several of the private residential homes in my constituency will have closed. There will be shutters on the windows and the staff will have had to go to the jobcentre. That will put more strain on a hard-pressed local authority. Those are urgent problems—they are happening now. Families hit by such problems—often unexpectedly—are devastated, as the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling so eloquently explained.

We have no time to lose. I welcome the Government's statements on standards, care, consultation and so forth. However, they must make haste to introduce legislation. I am a passionate advocate of the primary recommendation for funding made in the royal commission's report. I will argue the case for finding that money with anyone, at any time and in any place. The money will not be easy to find; perhaps we shall have to make do. In five years' time, the hon. Member for Stockport and I will meet and she will no doubt say, "I told you so." Perhaps she will be proved right, but I am not yet conceding the argument. I hope that other Members on all sides take the same view.

5.12 pm

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Like other hon. Members, I welcome the Government's speedy establishment of the royal commission after the general election. However, we should note that the debate is not on the royal commission. That is probably just as well, because we have discovered that none of the parties has yet finished analysing all aspects of the commission's report. The Government have come closest; they have already adopted more than half the commission's recommendations. The Conservatives say that they are waiting until the next election. The Liberal Democrats welcome the establishment of the commission, but they have not yet told us whether they accept its conclusions—with the exception of the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), who took a refreshingly clear view of the matter.

I declare an interest. Until three months ago, I was the sole carer of my mother, trying to combine looking after her with the work of the House. That was possible only thanks to the good will of the Whips. We should all declare an interest, because each of us might eventually need long-term care. On current trends, about six of those who have spoken in the debate will do so. We do not know which six—that is the problem.

We all hope that we will not end up in a home such as the one that I visited some time ago. When one of the inhabitants asked if she could have a cup of tea, the manager shouted into the canteen, "Here's a silly old woman who wants some tea". That seemed to sum up the policy of that home: he ran the place and no one else was worthy of much respect. Of course, many homes are completely unlike that. I mention that example only to demonstrate that there is a range of care—I shall return to that subject later.

We are all familiar with a general problem in dealing with welfare reform: the system has been built up piecemeal and it is replete with inconsistencies and unfairness. If we try to level it up, it is extremely expensive; if we try to level it down, it is distressing for those people who have benefited previously.

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire suggested that focus groups would advise us to spend more money on long-term care of the elderly. I am sure that he is right but, although I am second to none in my admiration of focus groups, I believe that one tends to get from them slightly imprecise answers. I do not believe that we have obtained a clear picture of what a focus group or the public in general would say if we asked, "Would you prefer us to spend more money on better care for the elderly"—as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey) advised—"or on enabling people not to use their own resources for care?" Those are two distinct areas, which we shall grapple with today.

Apart from the general problems of welfare reform, of which we are all aware, long-term care presents the additional problems that the people involved are elderly and vulnerable, and that there is a huge dependence on unpaid voluntary carers. No political party has got to grips with that to any degree. If there were a voluntary carer strike, we would all be in a mess.

Broadly, there are five ways in which we look after elderly people. There is voluntary care, for which relatively little has ever been done. The new Government have introduced two important new features there—the money for respite care and stakeholder pensions for carers. Those are the first steps towards recognising the importance of the service that voluntary carers provide. The second level is paid home care, for which there are no standards whatever, and for which the amount of support varies with the area. The statement by the Secretary of State emphasised what is being done in for home care, with the proposed national standards and national levels of provision and support.

There is nursing home care, where limited support is provided, although not for the nursing; there is residential care, where partial support is provided, including for nursing; and there is hospital care, where full support is provided. People note those inconsistencies and feel that it is unfair—and it is. The problem is what to do about it: whether to level up, level down or try to find a third way.

The royal commission report and this afternoon's debate may have downplayed the fact that it is very much what most people want, and in the national interest, that people should stay at home for as long as they feel comfortable there. About 70 per cent. of people spontaneously say that that is what they want—and it obviously makes life easier.

The royal commission gingerly suggests that more help could be given to improve the home to make it easier to live in. I believe that it underestimates the amount that can be done by imaginative local councils. For example, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) suggested community care alarms. In Stapleford, in my constituency, a centre is being built that will support houses in the vicinity. Without changing the architecture of every house, one can do more to help areas where there are many elderly people by ensuring that there is nursing care—and other kinds of care—close by. Experience in Denmark and Switzerland suggests that there is a big role to be played by mixed communities of older and younger people, who spontaneously give one another support.

Given the limited time, I shall focus on the aspect of the issue that comes up most frequently—distress at the loss of one's home. People who have gone into care that they hope will be temporary find that they must sell their home to cover the cost, and they feel a door slamming shut behind them. They know that they can never go home. That is very grim for them.

I believe that, if we asked the focus groups, or the population at large, whether they would accept that taxpayers' money should be used to help avoid that agony for our elderly people, the great majority would say yes. If we went a step further and said, "Do we also feel that taxpayers should help ensure that young people can inherit valuable homes as far as possible without deduction of value and that this is a key area for public expenditure?", I think that we would get a more mixed response. Nowadays it is quite rare for the children of a couple still to be living in the home when the couple die. Usually, we are talking about a house that is left to the children but that they will not live in. They will sell it and share out the proceeds. That does not seem to be a crucial element of national priority.

I favour any solution that enables the couple to maintain ownership of the house for as long as they live. One solution, suggested in the minority report, is the long-term loan. Another, referred to rather dismissively in passing in the majority report, involves the local authority imposing on the house a charge that is exercised only when it is sold on death of the owners. Both solutions would provide a relatively low-cost option to protect the couple from the trauma of losing their home.

I have talked to older people on the doorstep, including some of the angry pensioners whom most hon. Members have met. I find a somewhat reluctant but basic acceptance that such a solution could be the way forward. It provides security and leaves the bulk of the money that we hope will be provided for long-term care to make improvements in care to enable people to live better. It gives them the chance to hang on to their home as long as they are alive and it also gives the health authority the chance to recover the costs before the next generation takes over. Basically, I favour the minority report or a variation of it. Difficult though it is, I think that it achieves the right balance.

5.22 pm

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I am honoured to be called in the debate. I shall not speak for too long, so that all hon. Members who are in their places and who have not yet spoken may contribute to the debate. To take up a remark of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), I put on record again that, when the debate has been called for since the royal commission made its recommendations some time ago, it is improper that it should take place when the Government knew that the Select Committee on Health was away, given its trenchant criticisms of the Government for not moving forward quite so quickly as it wished. As a member of that Committee, who gives it her time and attention, I think that it is a gross discourtesy that other members of the Committee have not been given the opportunity to participate in a debate on matters that they feel strongly about.

We welcome the debate, but the time scale within which the Government will address these issues is disappointing. There is no doubt that, at the last election, the selling of homes in this context was a major issue. The Conservative party brought forward proposals, which it intended to implement had it won the general election. It is clear that the Labour party felt strongly about it. The Prime Minister said that it was a major issue that people should not be expected to sell their homes and that action needed to be taken. The public had a reasonable expectation that more would be done more quickly than the time scale envisaged by the Secretary of State as set out today.

If the opinion polls are correct, Labour Members, who will be fighting hard for their seats in some instances, will find it difficult at the next election to justify the fact that their Government, who will probably have been in power for four years when the general election is called, did not put any legislation on to the statute book to deal with a major issue. The fact that we shall have a White Paper by the end of next summer without any proper legislation in place is deeply disappointing to Opposition Members, to the nation and most particularly to our constituents, in whose name we all speak.

It has been an interesting debate. Members from both sides of the House have expressed their ideas on the royal commission's suggestions and on other proposals for the funding of long-term care. The hon. Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey) may have been privy to some information, and she made an interesting speech. Her views on the attendance allowance will be pored over at a later stage, because they may represent the views of Ministers as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) set out an interesting picture of the difficulties that will be faced. The bottom line is financing. Although many ancillary issues are involved, the bottom line is how we will pay for long-term care, given that we have an ageing population. People are living longer and medical care will allow them to live even longer. Later in their lives, people will rightly expect to enjoy, and participate in, the improving standard of living that will be available to everyone in the United Kingdom. That fact raises some difficult issues.

I have listened to the debate, and it appears that there is a growing consensus that the people who are elderly today may deserve a better deal than the rest of us might be able to expect if we are elderly, infirm or require 24-hour care. I hope and believe that proposals will be introduced that will provide extra help for the elderly of today. However, the current working population will not be able to afford such help unless we make proper provision for ourselves. The statistics suggest that one in six people will find that the lottery of life means that they require long-term care in their old age, while five in six will, I hope, avoid what can be for some an unhappy option. However, many people enter nice nursing homes, and there are many of them in my constituency. They find that they are pleasant places in which to live out the rest of their natural lives.

The rest of us will require private insurance schemes. I am pleased to hear that Ministers, having decisively rejected that option when the Government first came to office, will reconsider their potential. We should expect people to insure themselves against a need that is foreseeable in one in six cases. A mixed economy of provision for long-term care is the right answer. I regret only that that right answer will not be in place sooner. It will not be in place until after the election, and then it

[Miss Julie Kirkbride]

will take legislation to implement. Private providers and private insurance companies will have to get the schemes up and running before the mixed-economy regime is put into place.

Mrs. Humble: Will the hon. Lady comment on that part of the royal commission report that deals with insurance? It points out that women are more likely to be in residential care for longer, but that they also earn the least. Therefore, the people with the least to pay would have to contribute to a system, but the insurance companies would have to pay out the largest sums for them.

Miss Kirkbride: The hon. Lady ignores the fact that many working women participate in the work force, and their number is increasing. Not everyone will be able to save, and there will always be a safety net. However, the primary political concern at the moment is for those who have saved all their lives and now have to sell their homes to pay for their long-term care.

Two issues have already been set out. On the one hand, it is difficult to say that such people should not contribute to their long-term care needs if they leave an inheritance to their children and benefit from other people's tax bills. On the other hand, if we can offer those people an insurance scheme, a portion of which is guaranteed by the state—that is similar to the proposals that we made before the previous election—we can share the provision of the care that people reasonably expect now that standards of living are improving.

Like the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), who fears that some of the care homes in his constituency may need to close, I make a plea for care homes in my constituency because I fear that Worcestershire is facing a serious situation. Historically, Worcestershire gets a poor settlement from the standard spending assessment, and that has not been addressed by the Government's reforms of the SSA. Last year, our social services budget was cut by £5 million. Nevertheless, the county council was able to offer care homes a funding increase of 3 per cent.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) mentioned the huge problem of preserved rights. That keeps people in long-term care homes on a low amount of money, which means that, in most cases, others subsidise their stay, although sadly that is not true in the case of my right hon. Friend's constituent. The amount of money that is available for long-term care needs is a growing problem.

The Government's programme to improve employment rights, such as the minimum wage, is part of that problem. The Government's own figures suggest that the minimum wage costs industry as a whole some £8 billion. The working time directive, which will significantly affect care homes, costs around £6.5 billion. It is estimated that the cost of running a care home has increased by some 9 per cent. over the past year. Yet, as I said, care homes in Worcestershire have received only a 3 per cent. increase in funding. We do not know what the increase will be this year, but it will clearly affect care homes a great deal because it is very unlikely that any increase will match the costs brought about by the Government's legislation for improved employment conditions.

We are talking about not only jobs but the closure of people's homes. Many will have been used to living in a care home for several years. I therefore appeal to the Minister to consider that matter along with the proposals, however welcome, that people going into homes should be assessed according to national requirements. I appeal to him also to consider what impact the proposals will have on various counties, particularly Worcestershire, and how they will be financed in counties that, like mine, have historically received a low SSA.

I draw attention to the "Fit for the Future?" proposals, mentioned by the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble), which are causing great concern in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) put forward the very valuable proposal that we should be increasing the amount of money available for those nursing homes that make improvements, rather than trying to penalise those that cannot improve because of strict financing requirements and low funds.

I hope that, in his closing remarks, the Minister will mention the problem that VAT is to be levied on personal social services, a problem that has not yet been mentioned in the debate. That development might cause great problems for the supply of labour in nursing homes and for the supply of personal social services because the cost of such services will rise while the people receiving them will get no extra care.

5.34 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): As I have listened to the debate, I have collected a whole sheaf of paper containing comments that I hoped to make in response to contributions by other hon. Members. They will understand, however, that as time is short, I will cut to the chase.

I hope that hon. Members will excuse me for taking the opportunity to speak in support of the call by my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire) for the same rules to be applied throughout the United Kingdom in the determination of which services will be free and which will be means-tested, and how the means test will operate. If I understood my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, he said in his introductory remarks that he was aiming to achieve consistency throughout the UK, and perhaps when replying my hon. Friend the Minister of State will address that issue.

We are reaching the end of a century that has been rich in advances for older people, from the introduction of the old age pension in the early years of the century, through the advances made by the Labour Government in 1945 in implementing the Beveridge report and introducing the national health service, to the present, where the issue is how we provide for those who, through improved nutrition, a better standard of living, better health services and so on, are living longer.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his introductory speech, we should see that not as a problem, but as a success story. The aspiration of every Labour Government has been to reduce poverty, improve living standards and improve health. The task that we now face is to manage the consequences of that success.

The challenge to us is to ensure that we put in place arrangements that continue to fulfil our aspirations to promote social justice and social welfare. We need to put

arrangements in place that will enable our older people to remain part of the local community, with clear rights to services to meet their reasonable expectations. Clearly, because of the legacy of the previous Government, we are not getting that right at present.

Sir Stewart Sutherland and his committee thought not, and others agree with him. In a memorable quotation, Professor Alan Walker said that care services for older people put in place since the formation of the NHS and national assistance have been

"50 years of broken promises".

When the Audit Commission examined community care in 1984, its report concluded that

"the only option that is unavailable is doing nothing",

and as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) said, the status quo is not an option. That should be our watchword, and indeed it is.

Echoing the words of the Audit Commission, the Sutherland commission stated in its executive summary:

"The Commission conclude that doing nothing with respect to the current system is not an option."

There we have three ways of saying the same thing.

What the Government asked Sir Stewart Sutherland to examine is not a picture with which we should be comfortable. In each of our constituencies, there are older people who want to remain at home, but cannot do so because the services are unavailable. In each of our constituencies, older people assessed as requiring intensive 24-hour support cannot be admitted to an establishment because the funds are unavailable. In each of our constituencies, carers are placed under extreme pressure over many years because support services are unavailable.

How did we get into such a situation? To understand that, we must examine the funding of community care in the past. In the 1980s, it became the norm for older people who had become more dependent to be admitted to institutional care. That was a pattern quite different from previously, and in some ways we are still dealing with the legacy of that change.

To some extent, it is still the expectation of individuals and families that care in an institution is the inevitable consequence of increasing dependency among older people. That is not necessarily their wish, but their expectation, because that is what they have been conditioned to expect since the 1980s.

I shall digress for a few minutes to instruct the House that that is not a new idea. As I was preparing for the debate, I was reminded of a Para Handy tale. As some hon. Members may know, the great Para Handy tales were written by Neil Munro at the turn of the century, at just about the same time as pensions were being introduced. They are a wonderful set of short stories about the Vital Spark, the puffer that plied its trade up and down the Clyde crewed by Para Handy the captain, the chief engineer, and Dougie, the boy.

Tale No. 27 is entitled "Pension Farms". It was written in 1906. Let me set the scene for the House:

"The *Vital Spark* was making for Lochgoilhead, Dougie at the wheel, and the Captain straddled on a waterbreaker, humming Gaelic songs, because he felt magnificent after his weekly shave."

As they were looking over what they call the Glasgow promontory, Macphail was musing that there was a hen farm at the end of the promontory, and he had always wanted a hen farm. Para Handy told Macphail that he did not want one of those; what he wanted was a pension farm. The tale continues:

"'Rearin pensioners?' remarked Macphail, 'ye would lie oot o' your money a lang while rearin pensioners; ye micht as weel start growin' trees.'

'Not at aal, not at aal!' said Para Handy, 'there's quick returns in pensioners if you put your mind to the thing and use a little caation. Up in the Islands, now, the folks iss givin' up their crofts and makin' a kind o' ferm o' their aged relations.

I have a cousin yonder oot in Gigha wi' a stock o' five fine healthy uncles—no' a man o'them under seventy. There's another frien' o' my own in Mull wi' thirteen heid o'chenuine old Macleans. He gaithered them aboot the islands wi' a boat whenever the rumours o' the pensions started. Their frien's had no idea what he wanted wi' them, and were glad to get them off their hands. 'It's chust a notion that I took,' he said, 'for company; they're great amusement on a winter night,' and he got his pick o' the best o' them. It wassna every wan he would take; they must be all Macleans, for the Mull Macleans never die till they're centurions, and he wouldna take a man that wass over five and seventy. They're yonder, noo, in Loch Scridain, kept like fightin' cocks; he puts them ott on the hill each day for exercise, and if wan o' them takes a cough they dry his clothes and give him something from a bottle.

'Holy smoke!' said Dougie, 'where's the profits comin' from?'

'From the Government' said Para Handy. 'Nothing simpler! He gets five shillings a heid in the week for them, and that's £169 in the year for the whole thirteen—enough to feed a regiment! Wan pensioner maybe wadna pay you, but if you have a herd like my frien' in Mull, there's money in it.'"

So, this was nothing new.

When, in the 1980s, the Audit Commission urged the Government to action, it did so because it had found two things about those pensioner ferms that were growing up. First, the uncapped budget for nursing home and residential places was out of control and far beyond any financial projection provided to the Treasury. Secondly, it was becoming normal for older people to be placed in residential and nursing homes because funds were available for such placements but not for services at home. The Audit Commission called that—a phrase that we have already heard today—the "perverse disincentive" to care at home.

On the basis of the Audit Commission's promptings, in 1985 the Government commissioned Sir Roy Griffiths to report on future arrangements for community care. It is clear in retrospect that it was not within Sir Roy's remit to identify the required level of funding for community care; he was explicitly told to deal with the funds already in the system. They were the funds that became available as part of an unplanned growth, but there has been no growth in the funding arrangements for community care since 1993. The legacy of the Griffiths' recommendations and the legislation that followed them in 1990 are the problems that we face today. It is only this Government, in their remit to Sir Stewart Sutherland, who have taken the step of projecting the anticipated need for the next 20 years and identifying the level of commitment required to provide appropriate services.

We have now had the royal commission report for nine months. The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) made an impassioned plea for more speed, but this time we should get matters right, not just quickly.

Mr. Kirkwood: Come on.

Mr. Browne: We already have the experience of a Government taking nine years to do the job and getting it wrong, giving us these problems, so it is better that we get it right.

[Mr. Browne]

We all know that we cannot allow the crisis to continue. With an eye on the Whip, I simply say that, having reached the meat of my argument, I need not propose the arguments which are ably set out in chapter 6 of the report. However, I am impressed that at 1995 prices the commission's core recommendation for the separation of the elements of long-term care would cost about £1 billion, and I understand that that will rise to £5 billion in 2051.

I, like the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, have read the report only once, but I understand that the commission itself says that its model breaks down after 20 years and is unreliable thereafter. All I say to the Government is, if we can get the job right for 20 years, it will be 20 years longer than any previous Government have managed.

5.44 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): It is always a great pleasure and privilege to follow the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne). I am particularly grateful to him for reminding me of that great fount of wisdom and humour, the Para Handy tales.

The political imperative for striving to deal with the problem of long-term care is, in many cases, the 40,000 houses per year that have to be sold to meet the cost of providing such care. Behind those 40,000 houses are many tales of horror and misery. An impression prevails that legitimate expectations have been dashed and that a contract for welfare either never existed or has been torn up. In analysing the problem, we must be clear about the precise nature of the complaint.

What is wrong with people using their savings to pay for their long-term care when they are old? That is a proper way in which to spend one's savings. It is often said, "Well, using savings is fine, but not the house." However, in this country we have used the tax system for many years to encourage people to use houses as their principal savings vehicle. I supported those policies and regret that we have abandoned them in recent years. Nevertheless, the consequences remain: most people's principal saving is their house. Why should not it be used to fund their long-term care? If one is not prepared to use one's own savings for that purpose, whose savings would one use?

Those who have legitimate expectations of inheriting a property form a powerful lobby. However, is it proper for us to encourage people to have their cake and eat it? In our society, which is increasingly dominated by the nuclear family, people make implicit life style choices throughout their lives that often prevent them from actively participating in the care of their elderly relatives. Therefore, is it proper to encourage them to expect to inherit property and assets from those elderly relatives?

The sense of betrayal and unfairness persists. The real source of the grievance is means testing, and the perception that the state will provide for both the unfortunate and the improvident. I apologise for mentioning those categories in the same breath. However, we have no alternative but to put them in the same category because no state-run welfare system in the world has successfully devised a means of distinguishing between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Nevertheless, it is perceived that those who are unable will be cared for whereas those who have been prudent, or merely fortunate, will be penalised. That powerful sense of injustice fuels much of the argument that underpins our problems with long-term care.

The imposition of a means test will always generate a sense of unfairness and the belief that it will encourage anti-social behaviour by reducing the incentive to be prudent and save, thereby providing an incentive to be dishonest. The only way to deal with the irritation caused by the means test is to implement an accompanying principle of less eligibility whereby those who qualify on the means test will be provided for according to means that are less than those that would provide any form of independent existence. However, I do not believe that a return to the principle of less eligibility is politically possible. Indeed, we have heard powerful arguments today—not least from my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley)—to show that less eligibility already exists in the system and is unacceptable.

We are left with a problem, and there are two principal ways of dealing with it. First, we can nationalise by providing a universal benefit funded by the taxpayer. That is an attractive if expensive option, but we should always remember that, ever since the passing of the Great Reform Act 1832, whenever a Government have offered us such an attractive option they have bribed us with our own money. We shall pay for that option, with all the consequent economic inefficiency that flows from high taxation.

The second way in which we might deal with the matter is by reviving the concept of social insurance. We could seek the widest pooling of risk based on a renaissance of the contributory principle, with all the social virtues that that might also revive. If we were to take that route, early in the next century we should have to learn a great deal from the mistakes that we have made in the latter part of this century regarding the contributory principle. In many respects we must await the findings of the Social Security Committee report on the importance of that principle, but I suspect that we shall pursue neither of the two options. We shall be left with our existing difficulties, although we might implement a number of measures that mitigate the most offensive aspects of the problem by providing new incentives and removing, to an extent, old disincentives.

I see the substantive and minority reports of the royal commission making their most significant contribution in that respect. They are welcome and contain little that I can disagree with; indeed, I have heard little this afternoon that I can disagree with. I appreciate that these are long-term problems and we have to consider carefully what proposals to implement, but we have discussed in the debate a number of short-term measures that could alleviate the problem. I urge Ministers to act as, indeed, the Health Committee report enjoined them to do—urgently.

5.52 pm

Mr. Kerry Pollard (St. Albans): The concept of a nationally applied standard for care of the elderly is welcome, but care home owners and proprietors have concerns about its application—in respect of room size, for example. I ran care homes before being elected to the

House and remember having endless arguments with the local authority about the small box room of a standard house; it was fractionally below approved size. I therefore had to persuade the authority, with lots of arguments, that using the room was a viable option. We had clients ready to go into it.

The standards for room size are fine for new-build houses—they can easily be incorporated at the design stage—but it is often difficult to meet every standard when houses are being converted. That is particularly relevant to small homes—for instance, when a pair of semi-detached houses are being knocked together—and in such an example two rooms could be lost as they would be below standard. Major refurbishment, including knocking down walls, could be required, and that would increase costs considerably; it might even make the scheme non-viable.

I recently attended a regional conference in Towcester organised jointly by the National Care Homes Association and the Forum of Private Business. Also present were the hon. Members for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and for Havant (Mr. Willetts), as well as about 100 care home owners. A great deal of concern was expressed by those owners because they believe that full implementation of the proposed standards will force many of them out of business. Indeed, a recent survey of care home owners undertaken by the Forum of Private Business found that 73 per cent. of homes would not be viable if the standards were implemented as presented in the report.

Although other recent changes made by our Government—such as the minimum wage and extra holidays—are welcome, they have added to the financial burden on the care sector. I can speak from certain knowledge of the squeeze that the care sector has been experiencing for many years, and there is no doubt that the financial situation is grave. The departure of one client, for example, can mean that a place is empty for some weeks while a replacement is found—someone who will need to be assessed and fitted in. That often places small care homes in great financial difficulties.

Twelve years ago, there was an independent review of the charges on which current fees are based. I think that it may be time for another such review. If we are to have national standards, we should have a national minimum fee. In Northampton, for example, the local authority fee is £247 per week, while in neighbouring Norfolk it is £265 a week. Moreover, benefit increases are not always passed on, and the same applies to Government grants to local authorities.

I am particularly concerned about elderly people suffering from learning difficulties and mental incapacity, who are often overlooked. Traditionally, some were not even cared for in their own towns, but were farmed out to where care was cheaper. In my view, carers are saints. I well remember taking a newly elected councillor in my constituency to meet some residents in a care home. One lady whom we approached had just messed herself, and had messed her hand. My councillor colleague shook her hand, and when he realised what he had done, had to dash out to be sick. The care staff did not turn a hair; they persuaded the lady to go out and be bathed, after which she was given new clothes and taken back. Not a job for me!

Rates of pay are also among the lowest. In my area, a care assistant is paid £10,500 a year, while the head of a small care home is paid £15,500—and must be qualified to national vocational level 4, and be approved by the local authority. None the less, those who work in the sector are dedicated, and provide high-quality care.

In St. Albans we have many excellent care homes. We have Grace Muriel House—an Abbeyfield home—Fosse House, Vesta Lodge, Allington Court and Maryland, run by the Sisters of Mercy. They are first rate, and I would have no difficulty in living in one of them when my time came.

Although high standards are obviously necessary, what is vital is tender loving care. It is small comfort to be in a home that meets the "square metre" criterion and has the right number of double sockets if physical care does not match the tender loving care that we would all want for ourselves.

5.57 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): This is a sensitive subject. It is easy for us to assuage our consciences by speaking in debates such as this or writing reports, but we shall each be judged on what we do to help our own elderly relatives by looking after them and visiting them.

I say that because I am critical of the royal commission's report. I consider it irresponsible. I know that it is well researched, and that those who were asked to be members of the commission put a great deal of their personal time into its work, but I see no chance of the report's being implemented by any political party that is likely to take power. That is why I think it irresponsible. Politicians as a race are derided, but they are not part of a debating club; they must propose solutions that are capable of being implemented. No serious politician would come up with a proposal whose implementation would cost £1 billion now, rising to £5 billion or £6 billion over the century. Some doubt has been cast on those figures, but they are based on demographics.

If the report were ever implemented, however, it would not just be demographics that would result in such enormous expenditure; perceptions and behaviour would be changed. I think that the report is wrong—not factually wrong, but in a sense morally wrong, and dangerous and irresponsible for that reason. I believe that those who wrote the note of dissent were more courageous, fairer and more realistic. I was not surprised that neither the Secretary of State nor my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) were prepared to commit themselves to carrying out the royal commission's proposals. Even the Liberal Democrats, who are usually anxious to please everybody, tiptoed back from that precipice.

The proposals are not going to be put into effect. We have heard metaphors about long grass, but this is not a ball lying in the long grass—it has already been chucked out of the stadium by the Treasury. That is not a criticism, because I think that the Treasury is right.

We should be realistic. No one denies that the issue causes a tremendous sense of grievance, but that is what the real world is about. Means testing is rough justice, but it broadly works. I do not understand the principle of believing that people have to be responsible for their care and their housing throughout their life—until the unique moment when they reach retirement age, when, whatever their resources, the state should be willing to care for them. That does not seem morally right or justifiable—or even to make sense.

[Mr. Edward Leigh]

Implementing the proposals would require massive resources. If elderly people are in need, it does not matter whether they have been improvident. Are we going to deny them resources because we are worried about people who are angry because they want to inherit an entire property from their parents? Of course children want to inherit their parents' property, and of course they resent the fact that when their elderly parents go into a nursing home the state says that the family home has to be sold to pay for the care; but why should we satisfy those children and deny other elderly people who have nothing? Those are the people we should be spending our resources on.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I apologise to the House for not having been here earlier. I was in a Delegated Legislation Committee during the early part of the debate. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the fairness of the case for helping those who were told that they would be provided for by the state, including those who fought in the war? Is there not a legitimate case for realising their expectations of help without forcing them to sell all their possessions? If £1 billion is too much for the Conservatives, is there any amount that they would spend to bring back fairness for those people?

Mr. Leigh: I understand from the report that we already spend about £11 billion. If the report were implemented we would spend a lot more. I accept that a myth has been propagated. There is profound misunderstanding about the contributory principle. Every poll carried out on the subject shows that people think that what they pay in national insurance contributions covers all the welfare that they might receive and their health care costs. It does not even begin to pay for those services. We have to be honest with people about the real world. We do not have enough money to meet people's expectations. The more people's expectations are raised and their behaviour is changed, the greater the trap we end up with.

I am prepared to accept some compromises. The real political world tells me that a lot of what was talked about in the note of dissent is sensible. Perhaps the present cut-off point of £16,000 causes enormous resentment. Perhaps people who live in modest houses are being made to pay too much. Perhaps we should phase the threshold in more slowly between £10,000 and £30,000. Perhaps people are being forced into nursing homes and having to make their decisions too quickly. As the note of dissent says, they should be able to take out a loan based on their equity so that nobody is forced to sell a home. Perhaps we should look at the real cost of nursing. Those who wrote the note of dissent said that providing that facility free might cost only £100 million, which might be affordable.

Mr. Kirkwood: I well understand the point of the hon. Gentleman's thoughtful speech, but how does his pragmatic approach to the proposals in the note of dissent answer the problem that if I am disabled as a result of a heart attack, nobody looks at my bank balance, but if I get dementia, my credit card is taken from me before I am given treatment? How will his pragmatic approach deal with that essential question of fairness?

Mr. Leigh: Those who wrote the note of dissent answer that point. There is no entirely logical answer to the hon. Gentleman's fair question. Everyone understands the principle that people are entitled to free health care. It is based on clinical need, not their resources, but we have to draw the line somewhere. If people—I think they understand this—need clinical care, that will be provided free. If they go into a nursing home and need general care, that will not be provided free.

I know that this is messy and illogical, but it is all we can afford, so why not just be honest with people? If we were to—of course, we will not—go down the path that the royal commission recommends, a general expectation would build up in people's mind that, when they were elderly, the state would be prepared to care for them. That may be a civilised thing to contemplate. If we lived in a Scandinavian country, where people are genuinely prepared to pay 60 per cent. of their income in taxation, we could tread that road, but in this country people are not prepared to pay much more than 40 per cent. in taxation. That is why the new Labour Government have decided—or so they claim; we will not get into that argument—not to increase taxation. That is the real political world. No future Government would commit themselves to that level of expenditure.

We should say honestly to people that the family must help. And we must reinforce the contributory principle, which both parties have attacked over many years. That is why the report of the Select Committee on Social Security, chaired by the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), is important. We must try to rebuild the contributory principle; and we must be honest with people about social insurance.

We were prepared to create the immensely unpopular Child Support Agency. We said that the state would no longer provide; the father would provide. That was intensely unpopular. We have to be prepared to do the same in relation to long-term care. I will not make myself any friends by saying that, but I firmly believe that it is the truth.

6.7 pm

Mrs. Sylvia Heal (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. It is right and appropriate that the House should deal with long-term care, which is of concern to many of our fellow citizens. The issue is likely to affect any one of us: we may require care, or provide it for a spouse, partner or relative.

It is sad that our society's success in reducing mortality and increasing life expectancy has not been a cause for celebration. Instead, the predominant concerns of the media, health planners, policy makers and politicians has been the cost of the growing older population and whether the country can afford to pay for pensions and health care. That often results in older people being seen in a negative light. That is not only ageist but sexist, because women are likely to live longer than men.

Such attitudes ignore the contributions of older people. Many provide care for their spouses or for neighbours and friends—that is particularly the case when members of a

family live many miles from the relative who requires the care. Those of us who value the enormous contribution that older people have made and continue to make to society want to ensure that they feel respected, valued and cared for, with choice and dignity in the later years of their life.

The previous Government's policy in the early 1980s was to reduce the services that local authorities provided, just when demographic changes and changes in the national health service produced increased demand for residential and nursing care for a growing number of elderly people. The result was that people were no longer able to rely on the welfare state and the NHS to provide them with that free care—something about which today's pensioners still feel angry and betrayed. We will all have heard senior citizens recalling a lifetime of working, making national insurance contributions and paying taxes in the belief that care would be provided free of charge if they should ever need it.

The previous Conservative Government's policies on continuing care shattered that belief. In the 1980s, we saw the reduction of long-term NHS beds and local authority provision, and the growth of private sector residential and nursing homes. I recall clearly in the late 1980s and early 1990s that, when businesses of every description were going bankrupt and collapsing around the country, the one growth industry was private residential and nursing care. People with little or no experience of providing care became owners of residential and nursing homes. I recall someone I knew who went from owing a garage and selling second-hand cars to opening a residential care home.

The balance of long-term continuing care has been changed radically in recent years. Whereas the majority used to be looked after in either an NHS hospital or a public sector care home, and the minority in the independent sector, the position is now reversed. People are concerned about the quality and cost of residential care and the loss of savings. In many cases, people are concerned about having to sell their homes. Many children are disinherited by a parent entering a care home. Although some are phlegmatic, others are angry. Usually, it is the parent who is angry, because he or she wanted to pass on an inheritance to the next generation.

Let us not forget that some of those who would benefit from the savings are not well provided for. Some will have been carers of that relative, with little or no opportunity to save for themselves. We want to make sure that we can provide good quality care for the elderly and examine how costs can be shared between the taxpayer and the individual. The royal commission was given that task. The report, published earlier this year, made a number of recommendations. The three principles involved in the commission's approach to funding are as follows: that responsibility should be shared between the individual and the state; that any new system should be fair and affordable; and that any new system should be transparent in respect of resources, entitlements and personal responsibility.

The key factor that the commission recommends is the exemption of personal care from means-testing, to make it free to all those who are in need. When Ministers are considering the Government's response to that aspect of the report, I urge them to give serious consideration to this point. I recognise the difficulty of defining personal care, but I urge Ministers to tackle the matter and come up with a solution. They will know, as I do, that there are many organisations working with the elderly and with carers' groups—as well as individuals—who feel that time is no longer on their side. I have every confidence that the Government's decision will be based on fairness and equality.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State rightly reminded the House that continuing care is not provided exclusively for older people. There are many younger people with a congenital disability, or who, as a result of an accident or long-term illness or disability, require continuing care. They may have younger families to support and therefore have additional responsibilities and demands made upon them. Clearly, first-class domiciliary and respite care for them and their families is essential.

Funding is an important aspect of long-term care, as has been said. For those who are able to remain in their homes with support, the role of carers is important. The Carers National Association—an organisation for which at one time I was privileged to work—estimates that 80 per cent. of long-term care is provided by carers' relatives or by friends of those who need support. Much of the care for older people is provided by people who themselves are over 65, and in many cases it is only when the carer becomes ill and is unable to continue caring that help is sought from the community or social services. It clearly pays to support carers practically and financially. Together with all the many carers in this country, I was delighted when the Government came into office and began to acknowledge the contribution that carers make.

Fine words are not enough. It is not sufficient to say that carers are a hidden army who have worked very hard. They want a positive, practical response to the huge contribution they make. Therefore, the launch of the national carers strategy was widely welcomed. Also welcome was the provision of £140 million to fund short-term breaks. If there is scope for any extension of that money, that will also be warmly welcomed.

Many carers are either unable to work or can manage only part-time employment. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to assure me and the many carers who will be listening to or reading this debate that a review of their benefits, which recognises the value of what they do, will take place. Most people want to stay in their homes for as long as possible, and giving people the choice and the support they need to remain there is an important principle. To achieve that requires a good partnership between the health authority, the local authority and the voluntary sector. I am proud to say that both Sandwell and Dudley in my constituency contain some first-class examples of how that partnership is working and supporting some of our senior citizens in their homes.

Sandwell is a health action zone and it has discovered that the very elderly population—those over the age of 85—is rising significantly. Between 1997 and 2011, the number of very elderly people is expected to increase by 37 per cent. It is therefore important to have a well-thought-out strategy. Sandwell's age well strategy aims to increase the expectation of good health and social well-being later in life. It is about older people being involved and consulted about what strategies will benefit them and enable them to stay in their homes.

Some of the solutions have been so simple and obvious that they have been overlooked in the past. The focus is on enabling people to remain in their homes, so the

[Mrs. Sylvia Heal]

strategy has introduced respite care and a specialist health rehabilitation team; and a housing scheme for Asian elders. It has extended the availability of the community alarm scheme and introduced a new gardening and handy person scheme in conjunction with Age Concern to address the issues that can present problems to older people staying in their own homes.

The other borough in my constituency, Dudley, has also been innovative in its approach to try to ensure that people do not have to go into long-term care and to encourage them—through extra support—to try to stay in their homes. In April, it introduced the extra care housing initiative, which is a partnership approach in which the housing department provides the housing provision elements, while the social services department—in partnership with health colleagues—provides the extra care element through care assessment processes and home care schemes.

That scheme has offered prospective tenants sheltered accommodation with wardens who have an enhanced care role as an alternative to residential care. It provides a package of recuperation and rehabilitation that enables older people to achieve a maximum independent life style within a supported environment. The Government are encouraging such schemes by modernising social services and providing resources, and many Labour-controlled authorities are responding.

I welcome the announcements made today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, many of which are based on aspects of the royal commission's report. I want to highlight the long-term care charter, the national service framework for older people, and the insistence on monitoring home care services. In the past, those aspects of care have been neglected.

This Government will be judged on many things at the next election, and one will be their response to the demands for long-term care. The hallmarks of this Government have been fairness and social justice, and I have no doubt that those same hallmarks will be evident in their approach to the problem of long-term care.

6.20 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): It is not the Opposition's job to respond to the royal commission's recommendations. That is the Government's job, and I am disappointed that the key points of the commission's report have not been addressed. We are working on our own policy for long-term care which will go much wider than the terms of reference given to the royal commission, but perhaps that is one of the privileges of opposition. However, we shall certainly take account of the needs of young people who need long-term care. They should not be forgotten in any debate on this subject.

This has been a strange sort of debate, with hon. Members on all sides of the House describing the problems accurately. The debate has been interesting, too, as many hon. Members have lobbed into the arena their suggestions for tackling the problems that they have described. They have had the freedom to do so because the vacuum at the heart of the debate is the fundamental question of funding.

I am sure that many hon. Members would agree that they have presented their personal ideas on the matter rather than the official lines adopted by the parties to which they belong. Perhaps the debate has been all the better for that, but the curious effect has been to create the impression that we have prowled around the central question of funding without discovering what the Government intend to do about it.

The welfare state was set up to provide a cradle-to-grave formula for care. There is no point in wasting time discussing how miscalculations were made at that time, but those miscalculations mean that the wrong expectations were set for a fifth of our population. The debate is serious because it concerns so many people.

I expect that the politicians of the time were tempted to oversell their policies somewhat. That problem exists today and probably will persist in the future, but the difficulty left for today's politicians is serious, and it is getting worse.

There has been a consensus in the House in support of the hon. Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire), who said that we have a moral obligation to the wartime generation, if I may call them that. The people of that generation are the ones who feel most keenly that their expectations have been dashed.

In both the majority and minority reports from the royal commission there is a worrying note of complacency about the affordability of long-term care, which is based on the fact that the threat of a demographic time bomb has been exaggerated. However, other key social trends in British society will affect our ability to afford the quality of long-term care that we would like to provide for those who need it.

The effect of increasing job mobility and of more women going out to work will inevitably cause a reduction in the level of informal care provided, especially for older kith and kin. Another, darker trend in British society—family breakdown—will also affect our ability to pay for long-term care.

One in three marriages now end in divorce, and the proportion is rising. More relationships are informal than used to be the case but, sadly, they are also prone to fracture. In families that are constituted along less traditional lines, the sense of obligation to older family members is becoming weakened. Will step-grandchildren feel the same obligation to care for the grandparental generation? Will children feel the same sense of obligation to the absent parent, be it father or mother?

The burden of such broken family relationships and of the weakening of the obligation of family bonds will be borne by the state. While the demographics may prove to be more predictable, the new social interpretation of honouring thy father and mother could turn out to be much more difficult for Governments to cope with. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) may find that the £6 billion assessment of what the royal commission's recommendations would cost the Government in 2051 turns out to be wildly inaccurate because of the loss of informal care. We were rightly given a timely reminder by the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) that we must be realistic when dealing with human nature.

We do not start from a strong position in 1999. There is already a significant gap in funding. All over the country, there tends to be a shortfall of about £50 in the funding of residential care. To take only a couple of examples, in Cornwall the cost of residential care averages £252 a week but funding from social services is

£208. In Birmingham, the figures are £290 and £230. That gap presents politicians and relatives of people in residential care with the problem of who should pay. The money comes from family members if they are willing to pay; sometimes they are not. That causes enormous friction in the family. It also places the elderly resident in a predicament that can become embarrassing in a care home setting. If residents still have faculties, they worry about the shortfall from week to week.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): Does my hon. Friend accept that that is a particular problem in some of the high-cost home counties, where the independent sector, to provide a quality service—but one that hon. Members will feel is appropriate for older people—pays 30 per cent. above normal rates for care staff and nurses? In the home counties, the health service gets no London weighting allowance. Those areas are penalised for being prosperous without any recognition of the enormous cost of care. The crisis for the elderly is probably more acute now in the home counties and the officially prosperous areas than anywhere else in the country.

Mrs. Spelman: I thank my right hon. Friend. In this debate, several examples were given of how that is inextricably linked with the standard spending assessment, which varies around the country. The problem is aggravated in counties where assessments are unsatisfactory. She provides another example of a badly affected county.

How is the funding gap filled? The resident or the resident's family often have to dip into residual capital. The lower threshold of £10,000 introduced by the previous Government has not proved sacrosanct in reality.

There is some dispute over the number of homes sold annually to pay for residential care, but I hope that no one disputes that it is happening. The hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) used the word "agony" to describe the reaction of some people whose expectations are dashed and who find that they cannot pass on to their offspring the things that they have worked, scrimped and saved for all their lives. It is to try to underpin a savings culture that the Conservative party has been keen to encourage people to make savings and to avoid policies that would reward profligacy. As the savings ratio is going down, we urge the Government to pay attention to the matter.

Our document "The Common Sense Revolution" sets out some of the steps in our consideration of long-term care for the future. Long-term care partnership is a cornerstone of our ideas. We propose that for every £100 of insurance bought by individuals, £150 of their assets would be protected. In case that proves too ideologically difficult for Labour Members, I refer them to the comments on the report on long-term care made by the former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). He said that the Government would

"apply the principles set out in our welfare reform Green Paper—in particular: expecting people to insure against foreseeable risks and to make provision for their retirement."—[*Official Report*, 1 March 1999; Vol. 326, c. 743.]

Given those remarks, there can be no major ideological objection from Labour Members. Indeed, we are encouraged to hear that the Government are willing to explore that avenue.

Dr. Palmer: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: I should prefer to continue, as we have only limited time for the debate.

The hard facts are that 500,000 people are in long-term care—150,000 of them in nursing homes—and, of that number, 42,500 are funding their own care. While the commission was holding its consultations and producing its report, 75,000 homes were lost. If we are prepared to be honest, we know, as politicians on the doorstep, that people find that situation unacceptable. Rather like explaining the facts of life, I have had to justify, painfully, to elderly constituents—indeed, to my own relatives—the fact that almost all their assets have had to be used for funding their care. There is not much dignity for elderly people when youngsters have to tell them that.

There is even less dignity in the situation described so movingly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley)—the disparity experienced by those who have preserved rights but are evicted from nursing homes where they have lived for a long time. It is worth making one point that he did not make in order to increase the note of urgency in his request to the Government: when elderly, frail residents are moved from one establishment to another, unfortunately some of them do not long survive such an upheaval late in their life.

Given the family unfriendly life style of most Members of Parliament, there is a high chance that many colleagues who have spoken brought some of their personal experience to the debate. Nearly all of us brought experiences gained in our professional capacity. We are concerned when we visit a nursing home and see that something is going wrong—perhaps it was the stale smell of urine, or the vacant look of residents with nothing more stimulating than a flickering television to look at. Perhaps it was the undetected toothache of an elderly resident that resulted from malnutrition, or toenails uncut because chiropody services have to be paid for—that is a false economy because it impedes mobility.

It is not hard to see what we would do better, as a blood relative facing that situation, but, in so many cases, for practical reasons, care has to be delegated. We therefore repeat our request to the Minister that when he reconsiders the care standards Bill, extra attention will be paid to the regulation of the quality of care provided. Perhaps the Minister could confirm that when he winds up the debate.

We question the focus of the document "Fit for the Future?". As the hon. Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard) pointed out, the document's proposals would saddle those who provide nursing care with some most unwelcome burdens. It is the quality of human care that is important, not the room sizes, the allocation of wardrobe space, the position of windows or the number of double or single rooms.

The training of care assistants is minimal. My researcher described how, during one of her vacations when she was a student, she was put straight to work in a residential nursing home with no training at all. It would be so different if we heeded the words of my hon. Friend

[Mrs. Spelman]

the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe), who suggested that training should include palliative care, which is such an important part of quality long-term care.

Moreover, vulnerable adults are often involved. We gave assistance to the private Member's Bill, introduced by the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley), that became the Protection of Children Act 1999. I listened with great attention to what she said about the need to legislate for vulnerable adults, and I should like to place on the record the fact that it was my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) who tabled an amendment to that Bill to try to ensure that adults of diminished capacity—I think especially of those who suffer from dementia, who often make up a large number of those in long-term care—might be protected by legislation as a matter of urgency. Proper training and checking of the suitability of those who care for people with long-term needs is an imperative.

An older person living in their own home, in need of long-term care, may be subjected to all sorts of indignity: a veritable army of different carers calling during the day, chopping and changing, with no continuity. Demarcation may be a distinct problem when, for example, a home help cannot help someone with a personal care issue. The service is provided at the convenience of the service provider rather than at the convenience of the person to whom that service is administered. Not every grown-up with all their faculties wants to be put to bed at 9 o'clock in the evening. Recipients of long-term care often feel more done to rather than done with.

In the few moments that remain to me, I shall return to a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) regarding value added tax. Apparently, under the regulation of the private recruitment industry proposed by the Government, there will be a shift in employment responsibility from the elderly or handicapped person requiring a carer in the home to the agency supplying the carer. Agencies will then incur irrecoverable VAT charges. Naturally, the costs will be passed on to the client—hence the term "granny tax".

We have taken advice from Queen's Counsel, and we believe that the Government have the possibility of obtaining an opt-out from the sixth VAT directive as a result of article 13, which permits an exemption for

"services closely linked to welfare or social security work".

We would most strongly urge the Government to seek such an opt-out because, probably alone in Europe, we have so much private provision of domiciliary help compared with other European Union member states. It is absolutely in our national interest to request such a derogation, which would protect our elderly and vulnerable from that unnecessary tax.

Mr. Burstow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: I shall not, as I have only a couple of minutes left.

It seems to me that we have spent most of the last six hours walking round and round the main problem of long-term care—its funding—without a proper response from the Government. The promise of a White Paper is a poor substitute. What is the point of a comparison with other royal commissions on different subjects in the past? The present Government pledged to work out a fair system of funding. The royal commission said that change was imperative, and today we have missed an opportunity.

6.38 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The debate has been of a high quality. It may say something about the time that I have spent in the House of Commons, but I feel that it has been one of the best debates that I have heard.

We have had the benefit of some very strong opinions from my hon. Friends the Members for Stockport (Ms Coffey), for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) and for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (Mrs. Heal), largely based on their personal experience of that aspect of our society, and from the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe), who made an excellent speech on the basis of her long association with, and interest in, the subject, which certainly showed. The debate has given us a useful opportunity to discuss these very important issues.

After my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had spoken, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) responded on behalf of the Conservatives. I am afraid that it struck me, and I suspect my hon. Friends, that he had used a speech that he had—obviously and rightly—prepared earlier, which failed to recognise the significance of some of the announcements that my right hon. Friend had made, and the clear timetable that my right hon. Friend had outlined for responding to the royal commission proposals. The hon. Gentleman made the interesting and intriguing remark that he felt that local authorities were inadequately funded. I am sure that the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, will want to query and question the hon. Gentleman about exactly what additional money he is asking to be spent in that area.

Mr. Hammond: For the record, I said to the Secretary of State that the much-vaunted increase in social service spending was not evenly spread geographically, as the Minister well knows. Counties in the south-east are suffering from underfunding of their social services because of the distribution to the north.

Mr. Hutton: All right. I am prepared to accept that the hon. Gentleman might have said that if that is what he thinks he said. We will all have the benefit of checking and reading *Hansard* in the morning. However, as the hon. Gentleman was speaking, I made a note of his reference to the inadequate funding of local authorities. I am sure that we will resolve the issue in the usual way.

Rather interestingly too, the hon. Gentleman referred to a breach of contract represented by the existing arrangements for funding long-term care. Generally, the debate has been marked by the absence of party rancour, and I do not want to spoil that. But—*[Interruption.]*—there is always a but—I have to point out to the hon. Gentleman that it was the Conservative Government who drew up the contract. If there has been a breach of contract, we know who is responsible and we know who drafted its terms. Some Conservative Members—not all, because others have approached the debate in a very

responsible way—have been attempting to airbrush themselves out of any responsibility for the present mess—

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hutton: I will certainly not give way to the right hon. Lady. I have a great deal of respect for her, but she has not been present throughout the debate. I am happy to give way to hon. Members who have been part of the debate, but the right hon. Lady has not.

Mrs. Bottomley: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think that it is a courtesy that, even if by implication an hon. Member has referred to another hon. Member, it is appropriate to give way. I understand that the time that the Minister was referring to was almost certainly the time when I was holding office and responsible for community care legislation. It is—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. It is entirely a matter for the Minister whether he gives way.

Mr. Hutton: My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood made a good speech. She expressed her concerns about whether the new national minimum standards would be a voluntary, as opposed to a statutory, scheme. I can confirm that it will be a statutory scheme enforced by the new national care commission. Our proposals in relation to the national minimum standards will be set out in the Bill on care standards. My hon. Friend has not had the opportunity to read it because it has not been published. It will be published tomorrow, and she will be able then to read the details of our proposals.

My hon. Friend and several other hon. Members referred to their concerns about "Fit for the Future?", our draft standards for residential and nursing homes in England. I shall deal with their concerns later in my speech, because I want to reassure them about the proposals.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) and other hon. Members wanted us to announce our final conclusions today in response to the royal commission. I must point out to the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) that both their parties have been asking for the debate so that the House might express its views before the Government announce their final decisions. It is rather remiss of the hon. Gentleman, and rather a cheap shot, to make the allegation that he did, given that his party has been pressing the Government for a listening debate, for an opportunity to discuss these issues before any final decisions have been made. With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I think that it is probably better if we all avoid that sort of cheap-shot approach to these important issues.

When the hon. Gentleman tried to expound his position on the royal commission, I think that he probably left most of us completely in the dark when it came to whether he was supporting its main recommendations. *[Interruption.]* I was listening to him. I think that the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) might have shot his fox because he announced his strong support for the main recommendations set out in the majority report. That left the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam slightly exposed. I am sure that we shall become aware of the position of the Liberal Democrats on these issues in due course. However, I am not confident that that will be before the Government have announced their final set of proposals.

My hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) made a very good speech. He highlighted the need to develop better preventive and rehabilitation services in the national health service and local authorities. I am sure that he heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State make the Government's position on those issues clear: we strongly support such initiatives and developments. That is why we are making additional resources available.

The right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) made an outstandingly impressive speech. Anyone who heard the strength and the depth of his concern for his constituent could not fail to have been moved; I certainly was. In particular, he asked whether I could announce the introduction of emergency legislation to amend section 43 of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990. I am sure that he will not be surprised to know that I am not able tonight to confirm the Government's intention in that respect, but I hope that he heard the Secretary of State make it clear, when he opened the debate, that we are actively considering the implications of transferring to local authorities the funding and care management responsibility for people on preserved rights of income support. That may not be sufficient to satisfy the right hon. Gentleman's immediate concerns, and I understand that. However, I am always willing to talk in more detail with him about them. I should welcome such a conversation, because he obviously has very strong opinions on the subject.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire) also, I am glad to say, welcomed the Secretary of State's announcement. She spoke strongly about her views on the subject, and we all respect the strength of her feelings. Her support for pensioners was made clear.

The hon. Member for Broxbourne clearly has a great deal of knowledge of the subject, and that certainly showed. She announced that she had seven principles on which she wanted to base any future reform. She has rather trumped the three principles that we announced today, but the broad thrust of the principles that she outlined was consistent with those that the Secretary of State announced. I look forward to her continuing support as we try to introduce fairer arrangements.

I particularly welcomed the hon. Lady's comments about carers, because they are an important part of the system. It is important that we try to build, if we can, a solid basis of support for any future changes, so that people know exactly where they stand and can make proper decisions about their own futures. I also welcome her support in principle for the idea of national standards for nursing homes. I hope that she can persuade those on the Opposition Front Bench about that, because they seem to oppose the idea.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley), who introduced and saw through the House the Protection of Children Act 1999, also made a very good speech. She raised the question of protecting vulnerable adults. I am glad to tell her that new provisions protecting vulnerable adults along the lines of those in

[Mr. Hutton]

that Act will be included in the Bill on care standards, which will be published tomorrow. I hope that she will be able to support those proposals.

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of new national minimum standards. They will be implemented by the national care commission, and I assure her that compliance with those standards will be a condition of continuing registration. She can be confident that those national standards will make a difference.

The hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) advised the Government to take time to get any new framework right; we certainly want to get it right this time. We now have an important opportunity and we want to make the most of it. We have set out a clear timetable for proceeding, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will think that that is the sensible approach. He asked whether national minimum standards will apply throughout the United Kingdom. My understanding is that there will be minimum standards for England, Scotland and Wales, but I am not sure what the position is with the new devolved Administration in Northern Ireland. That clearly will be a matter for that Administration.

Rev. Martin Smyth: The Minister will remember that I pleaded that the standards should be not the lowest common factor, but the highest common denominator.

Mr. Hutton: Yes, I remember the hon. Gentleman saying that. However, he should remember that this will be the first time that we have attempted to set national minimum standards throughout that important sector. That is a significant step forward, which is necessary if we are to tackle the quality of care being provided in residential settings. I know that some people do not like that idea, and I intend to address those concerns in a few minutes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport made a particularly good speech, in which she explored some of the wider principles that could, or should, guide our approach in future, as well as the detailed points arising from the royal commission. She will know that, today, we are not making final announcements about all the royal commission's recommendations on funding long-term care. I am sure that she will continue to take a close interest in those matters, and we certainly look forward to hearing her further contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) expressed his concern about the need to avoid compulsory house sales to fund long-term care. I am sure that he will be glad to hear that, as the Secretary of State made clear, that is one of the six areas to which we are giving particularly detailed attention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) made an interesting speech. I tried to follow it closely, but I am afraid that I missed most of it, and I have some sympathy with the *Hansard* reporters. I wonder what they will make of his contribution. He told me that he had taken the precaution of sending them in advance a copy of his speech, and I am sure that that will make all the difference.

The hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) made one of his characteristically interesting speeches. He struck me as being a fan of the old poor laws, and some of his terminology harked back to those desperately grim times. If I have done him an injustice, I am sure that he will correct me whenever he wants to.

Many hon. Members have expressed their concerns about the present system of providing long-term care. It is clear that, if we are to address those concerns in a sensible and sustainable way, we will need long-term solutions. That is certainly the Government's approach, and one that my right hon. Friend spelled out clearly in his speech earlier this afternoon. However, we need to recognise that finding those solutions will not be the responsibility only of social services or the NHS. The issues raised are for our society as a whole to face and resolve. As my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis made clear, old age will, inevitably, touch us all, either in our own lives or the lives of those around us. It was Francis Bacon, in 1625, who rightly said:

"Age will not be defied."

We live in an ageing society. Over the next 40 years, the number of people aged 85 and over will double. People are entering care later—the average age is already 84. When older people enter residential care, they are more likely to be frailer and in need of more intensive care and support. As the hon. Member for Meriden said, as patterns of family life are changing, so too are the networks of care and support for older people. There are therefore big challenges ahead of us if we are to respond effectively to those trends, and in so doing, lay the foundations for a better and more secure environment for our older people. Those are issues on which I hope we can all agree.

First and foremost, we have to ensure that we maintain and promote the independence of older people. All hon. Members who have spoken in the debate have expressed their strong support for that aim. People naturally want to stay for as long as possible in their own homes, where they feel most comfortable and content. We all would want to have that option and to be able to exercise it.

That means providing the necessary support that older people need at home, at the time that it is needed. It also means helping their informal carers to do their vital job more easily, and giving them the support that they need. That is why we are making significant additional resources available in both those areas over the next three years. We are providing £140 million for our carers strategy and £750 million in new local authority grants.

Secondly, when people need to enter residential care, they need reassurance that the quality of care will be of the highest standard, in conditions that respect their privacy and dignity at all times. That is why we are developing, in consultation with providers and all other interested parties, new proposals for national minimum standards for residential care homes so that the public at large can have full confidence in the system.

Those standards must be realistic and affordable. They must give providers a sensible time scale in which to make any necessary changes. The new independent national care commission will need to be up and running before they can be properly implemented.

Clearly, the present arrangements are not good enough. They do not provide a level playing field between the public and the private sector, nor do they guarantee proper consistency across the country. Those are both crucial if any inspection and registration scheme is to be effective

and satisfy proper public confidence. There are too many loopholes and problems in the existing scheme, which mean that some homes are not inspected at all, and poor quality homes are not easily closed down.

Our new proposals will deliver a more effective and efficient system. The principle of independent regulation has been widely welcomed by the industry. The care standards Bill, which will be published tomorrow, will contain the details of the new arrangements and I am sure will be considered in detail in the House and in another place. I hope that our announcement today that we are broadly accepting one of the two main recommendations of the royal commission by establishing the new national care commission will be welcomed by hon. Members.

Mr. Hammond: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he clarify whether the care standards Bill will contain the details of the standards, or only the details of the framework? If the latter, can he assure us that the standards will be available to us to consider in parallel with the Bill?

Mr. Hutton: Let me correct any misunderstanding that I may have caused the hon. Gentleman and the House. The Bill will not contain the details of the national minimum standards—I hope that that is clear. It could not contain such details, for the simple reason that we have not yet decided what the national minimum standards will be. We are still consulting on that, and the end of the consultation period has been extended to 21 January, because of the concerns about accessing and having the document available for people to read and digest. We have had more than 10,000 copies of the document prepared, given the extensive interest in its contents.

I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman and several of my hon. Friends who have raised concerns about "Fit for the Future?" that we are consulting. No decisions have yet been taken in relation to the detail of those standards. That would be quite improper while the consultation was under way. The consultation period will finish on 21 January, and we hope to settle the final national minimum standards thereafter.

As I do not know the Committee timetable in the House for the care standards Bill, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the absolute assurance that he wants that the standards will be available by the time that the Standing Committee meets to discuss the Bill. We shall try our best to make sure that that is possible, but I cannot give the absolute assurance that he seeks from me today.

Improving the quality of long-term care will require us to look further than just the buildings in which residential care is delivered. Improving the training of the social care work force will be vital. The social care work force as a whole is now more than 1 million strong, and yet 80 per cent. of the work force have no social care qualifications of any kind.

We must improve the situation as a matter of urgency. That is why the Government have established a new national training organisation for personal social services. We are currently consulting on a draft national training strategy, which has been prepared in consultation with the employers and providers. We are providing an additional £120 million through the training support grant to improve social care training.

Thirdly, the system of funding long-term care must be fairer, not only between the taxpayer and the individual, but across the generations. Any changes must be sustainable over the longer term. That is why it makes sense for decisions in this important area to be taken as part of the spending review that is currently under way and will be completed by next July.

My right hon. Friend identified six issues raised by the royal commission which we are examining in particular detail and which reflect many of the concerns expressed during the debate today. That shows that the Government are taking these matters seriously and are moving forward as quickly as we can.

The way in which long-term care is funded is an important part of the debate, but it would be a mistake to overlook the importance of the quality agenda and the need to give people real and effective choices about where their care is delivered. Making changes to the funding mechanisms without tackling those two related issues would undermine our efforts to find a genuinely long-term solution.

Today, the Government laid out the clear timetable that we are following in responding to the royal commission's recommendations. We have set out the principles that underlie our approach to making the system fairer and better. I am grateful to all hon. Members for their contributions to this important debate, which I am sure will continue both in this place and outside. There are big challenges ahead. We have made it clear that work is in progress. The Government will respond fully and comprehensively to each of the challenges.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

LIAISON COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Chris Mullin and Mr. Malcolm Wicks be discharged from the Liaison Committee and Mr. Barry Sheerman and Mr. Robin Corbett be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Rural Areas (Policing)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

7 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Good evening, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is kind of you to stay for this debate.

I start with a positive and absolute statement, which I hope can be accepted by all. It is that, wherever one lives, one has the same right to the full and proper protection of the police authority. In other words, whether one lives in the country or in a sparsely populated area of the country, one has the right to the same expectation of police protection as those who live in an urban area or in a city.

That being so, I want to express the deep concern of many who live in the countryside and of the police force whose responsibility it is to deal with crime in the countryside, and to show that the cost of policing sparsely populated areas has been made clear to the Home Office, not just by my chief constable of the Devon and Cornwall constabulary, but by 13 other police authorities—those of Cambridge, Cumbria, Dyfed Powys, Gloucestershire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, North Wales, North Yorkshire, Suffolk, Warwickshire, West Mercia and Wiltshire.

I will show that, whereas the Government claim to be flexible and modern, they are not; whereas they claim to react sensibly to logical argument, they do not; whereas they claim to care about and to understand the problems of the countryside, most palpably they do not; whereas they talk of open Government, it is fake since they refuse to publish a Home Office report, thereby turning it into a secret document.

Let me start at the beginning. I was alerted by a letter—dated 16 September from the 14 police authorities to which I have just referred—to the Home Office on the impact of the cost of the provision of police services in rural areas. It states:

"the rural police authorities have argued that they were disadvantaged because of insufficient recognition of the extra costs incurred by sparsity. As a result, most Police Authorities have suffered reductions in Police Officers. Some of these Authorities are facing considerable criticism from rural localities because of a lack of a 'police presence'."

It goes on to say:

"the latest report on sparsity provides conclusive evidence that it results in additional policing costs and recommends an adjustment to the funding formula"—

and that is even though the cost of patrol has been excluded from the figures.

The Minister should know that your predecessors, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), who went from your job to the Cabinet—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The right hon. Gentleman is gently straying away from parliamentary language.

Sir Peter Emery: I thought that I was saying that the Minister's predecessors, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth, who went from the Home Office to the Cabinet—I wish the Minister the hope of such a promotion—and the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), Minister of State, Home Office, who has also been promoted, both stated that they would respond positively to the findings of the national research on sparsity.

Thus I was sufficiently worried to write a letter to the Home Secretary on 5 October. It stated:

"The costing of this area of policing I believe is not fully calculated in the funding formula."

I asked the Home Secretary whether he would examine that problem, irrespective of previous views on the matter. I believed that my letter was reasonable and I hoped for a positive response.

On 20 October, I received a reply, which stated:

"There was general agreement that a sparsity factor had been detected, but less agreement about how to include it appropriately in the police funding formula."

The letter continued:

"the Government will need to be satisfied that the research has provided a final answer to this question which is beyond dispute or challenge."

That is a rather optimistic goal in any political matter. I shall return to that point later. The letter went on:

"There is also the matter of the three-year freeze on changes to the funding formulae announced by the Deputy Prime Minister."

I subsequently learned that the Home Office report showed that if the sparsity factor in Devon and Cornwall is taken into account, £3.6 million extra should be paid to that authority because of the vast rural area that the police have to cover. I wonder whether I can ask the old Cholmeleian as a former Highgate councillor for seven years to confirm the figure and not to sidestep the question?

I wrote another letter to the Home Secretary, which stated:

"I have read with considerable care your letter of October 20th . . . You will not be surprised . . . to learn that it did not give me any of the assurances which are necessary for policing in rural areas."

I was disturbed by the Home Secretary's introduction of facts that had nothing to do with rural areas—for example:

"The £1.24 billion extra money will do little to help police expenditure in line with increases in pay and pensions and the cost of living over the three year period".

The money will not cover all that. My letter continued:

"The funding for 5,000 new police officers is not to increase establishments by an extra 5,000 men, but will with luck just replace the drastic fall in officers now being felt by most forces".

A reference in the Home Secretary's letter to £50 million towards the new national radio communications system sounds marvellous but is inadequate because it will leave between £700 million and £950 million to be found by local police authorities, probably through cutting personnel. My letter went on:

"Now turning to the main reason for my original enquiry. I wrote because I am certain that urban and city police authorities will always find reason for objecting to money for the extra cost of rural policing."

There would never be a single view, which the Home Secretary seemed to want. I asked him:

"how can one overcome the factual agreement that a 'sparsity factor' does actually exist"?

Everyone accepts its existence. The Government tried to mitigate that by saying:

"the Government will need to be satisfied that the research has provided a final answer to this question which is beyond dispute or challenge".

However, as I made clear:

"there will never be an answer that is 'beyond dispute or challenge'".

That is a civil servant's phrase and represents a "Yes, Minister" approach of doing nothing.

My letter continued:

"I am also massively concerned with what appears to me to be a further let-out for no action."

I went on:

"You say, 'there is also the matter of the three-year freeze on changes to the funding formulae announced by the Deputy Prime Minister. We hope to announce details of how the police funding formula will operate in relation to next year's financial settlement shortly.' Therefore, unless you accept the need to include within the new formula aspects of the cost of rural sparsity, further delay is guaranteed."

That, I believe, is unacceptable.

It is interesting to note, however, that at that time—without my knowledge—a letter was being written by and on behalf of the Association of Chief Police Officers of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, making two particular points:

"You will recall the time scale for consultation was relatively short".

It added that a number of chief police officers felt that, in composing the ACPO response to the report, the

"strongly held views of a number of Forces that present funding arrangements take insufficient account of the costs of delivering effective police services to communities in thinly populated areas had not been sufficiently taken into account."

Most interestingly, it went on to say that

"the Chief Constables' Council . . . while still conscious of the concern of those Forces with high intensity policing areas which might expect to lose grant if greater account is taken of sparsity factors resolved that the urgency of the needs of those Forces affected by sparsity is such that the Report's recommendations on adjusting the mechanism for calculating grant on the basis of sparsity factors should be implemented without further delay."

Those are the people who the Home Office suggested could never come to an agreement, but here they are—making a direct reference to the Home Office and the director of the police policy directorate—saying that action should be taken.

In answer to a written question, the Home Secretary states:

"I understand the wishes of rural police forces to see the research findings implemented. Before doing so the Government will need to be satisfied that the research has provided a final answer to this question, which is beyond dispute or challenge."

However, all our chief constables are saying that the answer is beyond dispute or challenge. What greater evidence can the Home Secretary have? He goes on to say:

"Our present intention is that, subject to consultation . . . we shall not make any changes to the method of police grant distribution, or revenue support grant distribution, generally for 2000-01."—[*Official Report*, 2 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 118W.]

There will be no substantive change in the operation of the police funding formula for the next year. That is massively disappointing.

The chief constable of Devon and Cornwall wrote to me and made a point that is most relevant in all this consideration:

"The research into the impact of sparsity was commenced well before the moratorium was introduced",

and announced by the Deputy Prime Minister. Therefore it should at least be arguable—and positively the case, I believe—that the changes should not be caught up by that moratorium. However, retrenchment by the Home Office continues. On 22 November, in the last paragraph of his letter, the Home Secretary says that

"we propose to set considerable store by stability in the grant system to help police authorities plan ahead. As you know, the Deputy Prime Minister has announced a three-year freeze on changes to SSA funding formulae pending the wide ranging review of the revenue support grant system across local government. In view of the moratorium, the Home Secretary has decided that it would not be appropriate to make substantive changes to the method of police grant distribution next year."

What does all this show? It shows that, as I have suggested, the Government have been entirely inflexible. They have refused to act, not just in response to logical argument but to deal with proven injustice. No modern government there. They will not publish the secret report, and that, too, does not betoken open government. As for overcoming the problem of crime in the countryside, the Government are turning a blind eye—or else they just do not give a damn for country folk.

The situation is not acceptable, and it must be overcome. The sparsity factor with respect to the cost of providing police services in so many parts of the country must be not just recognised but acted on, and acted on smartly.

7.16 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) on securing the debate, and on raising what I agree is a very important question. Although my constituency is urban, it is located in a rural county, the county of Norfolk, and I am well aware of sparsity questions that are constantly put to me by my police authority and my chief constable.

The issues of rural crime and policing have been raised here in earlier Adjournment debates—most recently on 19 October, by the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard)—and in other debates on crime. The Government have taken measures to ensure that the whole community, along with police and local authorities, can deal with crime issues in the context of partnership.

I accept the force of the right hon. Gentleman's opening comment that it is important for every citizen to feel secure in regard to these issues, and to be treated equally. That is an important principle of our national life; the right hon. Gentleman was right to highlight it, and the Government adhere to it. I shall say more about that shortly.

We believe that partnerships, and the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998—I shall say more about that shortly as well—have proved to be a means of developing effective partnerships on the ground, reducing the impact of crime and the fear of crime. However, I want to set the debate in the context of the issue of crime and the policing of rural areas more generally. The right hon. Gentleman may be interested to learn that I met his chief constable—

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

and a number of other chief constables—in his capacity as president of ACPO, at a very pleasant dinner on Tuesday evening in London. We discussed some of the issues in—how shall I say?—a friendly and comradely way. Perhaps "comradely" is not the appropriate word, but we engaged in a positive and constructive exchange.

Sir Peter Emery: Is the Minister saying that the chief constable enjoyed the dinner?

Mr. Clarke: He did—and we paid for it, so he should have enjoyed it. Anyway, we had a very useful exchange.

The latest Audit Commission figures show 59 crimes per 1,000 of population in Devon and Cornwall. That is significantly below the national average of 78 crimes for every 1,000. The number of burglaries per 1,000 dwellings is 12, compared with the national figure of 20. In its policing plan for 1999–2000, the police authority said:

"The people of Devon and Cornwall live in one of the most crime free areas of the United Kingdom. Improved detection rates and falling crime figures . . . ensure that the South West rightly has the reputation as one of the safest places in Britain to live and work."

Those are not the words of a Minister; they are the words of the police authority.

According to the most recent figures, during the 12 months to March 1999 there was a 4.7 per cent. reduction in crime in Devon and Cornwall—some 4,300 fewer offences. That compares with a 1.4 per cent. reduction nationally. I do not suggest that there is no cause for concern in Devon and Cornwall; I am merely saying that the area has a good record.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Does the Minister realise that, in the country, it takes a policeman a very long time to travel from the station to the scene of a crime? In the case of a night-time burglary, it may take half an hour or three quarters of an hour, in marked contrast to the time that it takes in inner cities.

Mr. Clarke: Of course I appreciate that. It is a real point. I will come to it in referring to the research report.

Devon and Cornwall's budget this year of £175.9 million showed an increase of 5 per cent. over the previous year—the sixth largest budget increase among all the police authorities. I was not going to mention it, but, additionally, the Government recognised the pressures on policing the eclipse of the sun in August. The Home Secretary approved a special grant of up to £520,000 to deal with those costs. We knew that not even Devon and Cornwall could evade the forces of nature that meant that the eclipse took place there.

In 1999-2000, Devon and Cornwall will spend an estimated £112.30 per head of population, compared with the shire county average of £114.5 per person. A succession of above average funding increases for Devon and Cornwall has reduced the gap between the force's spending per person and the shire county average.

On Thursday, the Home Secretary announced that the Government proposed to increase Government funding for Devon and Cornwall for the next year by 2.6 per cent. Of course, the police authority will decide how to deal with the matter generally. That is all I intend to say specifically about Devon and Cornwall. I come to the sparsity arguments that the right hon. Member for East Devon fairly raised.

Not only am I familiar with the issues as a Norfolk Member, but, earlier this year, I met a delegation from the police authorities that are directly affected—the group that the right hon. Member for East Devon mentioned—to discuss and to consider the issues in some detail. I acknowledge those issues.

Here is the so-called secret report. I have it in my hand. There is no secret report on which the Home Secretary has been sitting. In April 1998, the Home Office commissioned a research study. The right hon. Member for East Devon might have been slightly more graceful. He could have congratulated the Government on setting up the study, which was never commissioned in detail over the 18 years of the last Conservative Government, to establish the position. It might have been gracious to acknowledge that we had gone ahead with it.

Earlier this year, the report was finalised. It found that additional costs were involved in policing sparsely populated rural areas for precisely the reasons to which the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) referred. The report was not about police numbers; it was about the additional costs involved in policing rural areas.

The report recommended that the police funding formula should be changed to reflect those additional costs—that some funding should be switched from metropolitan forces and allocated to shire county forces. There is no reference in the report to claims that an extra £3.6 million would come to Devon and Cornwall through such a formula. Other figures have been bandied about for other authorities. In response to the specific request by the right hon. Member for East Devon to clarify the matter, I cannot confirm that the report states that Devon and Cornwall will receive an extra £3.6 million.

Sir Peter Emery: The Minister will realise that, under House procedure, as the report has been laid on the Table, it will be placed in the Library for us all to see.

Mr. Clarke: I was coming to that.

On 21 July 1999, a copy of the executive summary of the report was sent to all police authorities in England and Wales, so that they could all have access to the data. A copy of the full report and the executive summary was sent to the House of Commons Library earlier this week. It is in the Library for the right hon. Gentleman and any of his colleagues to examine its detail. I understand his point, but we were there a little before him in looking at the issues.

In a parliamentary written answer on 2 November, the Home Secretary announced that he did not intend to make changes to the police funding formula for 2000–01 for the reason that the right hon. Member for East Devon stated. In July 1998, the Deputy Prime Minister announced a three-year freeze on changes to the SSA funding formula, pending a wide-ranging review of the revenue support grant system throughout local government.

In view of that moratorium, the Home Secretary decided, subject to consultation and parliamentary approval, that it would not be appropriate to make substantive changes to the method of police grant distribution for 2000–01. I acknowledge that that has been

disappointing to the forces where sparsity is a significant factor; that is a fair argument for the right hon. Member for East Devon and others to make. I confirm that we will fully consider the position in the next round, taking into account a number of reforms that need to be considered, including sparsity. However, the needs of police forces with sparsely populated areas are already taken into account in the funding formula. A sparsity element accounts for about 0.5 per cent.—about £35 million—of funding. The report examines whether that is enough.

The Government are addressing the issue of police numbers constructively. On 30 September, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced a new crime fighting fund, part of which will be used to recruit 5,000 police officers in addition to the number that forces would otherwise have recruited over the next three years. Some £35 million of new money, not in the comprehensive spending review settlement, is to be allocated to meet the costs in 2000-01 under the challenge fund.

Today, we published our guidelines for forces to apply for resources from the fund. I shall not detain the House by going through all the criteria, but forces are specifically requested to supply information to support the size of their bid, including details on issues such as tackling crime hot spots and innovative proposals addressing the need to put more officers on front-line duties. The needs of rural areas should be considered in the bids.

I am not in a position to know what bids will be made by what authorities, but I should be very surprised if the Devon and Cornwall authority and others, including my own, for which sparsity is a factor do not take the opportunity of bidding for some of the new money to argue that the costs of policing rural areas should be reflected. Although we do not have any proposals on sparsity in the current spending round, the guidelines are significant.

I need to clarify something that I said earlier. There are exemplary tables in the document with figures, including the £3.6 million, but there is no Government commitment to the tables. The figures do not show the precise amount that will come through. They are useful for debate on the development of the issues.

Our approach to the issues and the guidelines for the new money are positive and constructive. I should like to conclude by emphasising the virtue of partnership. Rural communities have different needs from urban ones. Many police forces covering large rural areas have mounted initiatives to tackle crime there. The allocation of police resources is an operational matter for chief constables, but we believe that the most effective response is through the partnership approach, which is at the core of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the new crime reduction partnerships.

There have been some positive developments in the partnership approach. Some crimes are particular to the countryside, including the theft of livestock and farm equipment and threats of violence from the activities of animal rights activities. There are also concerns that crime is being displaced from urban areas, with criminals from elsewhere going into rural areas. Those are legitimate concerns.

In areas where the partnership approach has been taken forward, positive ideas have been developed. For example, there are 35 different watch schemes along the lines of neighbourhood watch, including farm, horse, country and even poacher watch schemes. Such schemes are directly relevant to rural areas. There are more than 500 farm watch schemes across England and Wales to combat rural crime.

We are glad that this important matter has been raised. Through resources and partnership, the Government are fighting rural crime and will continue to succeed in their aim.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 6 December 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Racism

1. **Mr. Barry Gardiner** (Brent, North): If he will make a statement on progress made in combating racism in the police force. [99676]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Many recommendations of the Macpherson report about racism in the police service have already been implemented, in line with the action plan that I published in March. The promised Bill to extend the scope of the Race Relations Act 1976 in respect of the police and other public authorities was published last Friday. New disciplinary procedures and a code of conduct came into effect in April, making racist language or behaviour a breach of the code. Also in April, I set targets for the recruitment, retention and progression of minority ethnic police officers. In addition, a nationally co-ordinated and funded programme of race awareness training is now under way in police forces.

Mr. Gardiner: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that response. Will he say how many prosecutions for racially motivated offences have been commenced under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998?

Mr. Straw: The latest provisional information shows that there have been 99 convictions for the racially aggravated offences provided for under the 1998 Act. Although that is 99 offences too many, in one sense the fact that the prosecutions have taken place shows the importance of making such offences subject to the law.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Does the Home Secretary recall that, in one of his first speeches after his appointment as Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, Sir Paul Condon condemned racism outright? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, in the almost seven years that he has been Commissioner, Sir Paul has put that approach into practice, with the result that there is now far less racism in the Metropolitan police than formerly? As Sir Paul nears retirement, would not this be a good opportunity to congratulate him on what he has done to improve race relations in the metropolis?

Mr. Straw: I am delighted to join the hon. Gentleman in extending those congratulations to the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, whose record on tackling racism is consistent with his broader record of reducing crime in London very significantly during his period in office. It should also be put on record that, even before I introduced the targets for improving the recruitment and retention of black and Asian officers in the police, the Metropolitan police service under Sir Paul's stewardship had made considerable progress in that direction.

Electoral Reform

2. **Mr. Martin Salter** (Reading, West): If he will make a statement about reform of electoral procedure and voting systems. [99677]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The Representation of the People Bill, which will modernise our electoral procedures, received its Second Reading last Tuesday.

Mr. Salter: Does my hon. Friend recall the representations that I made to him earlier this year, in which I drew attention to the fact that the British National party had submitted false European election nomination forms? In that way, because it could claim that it was fielding the requisite number of candidates, it was able to ensure that its disgusting and racist views could be broadcast on national television. How will the newly published Representation of the People Bill deal with that tactic? Does my hon. Friend plan to allow a longer period in which nomination papers can be checked to prevent such abuses?

Mr. O'Brien: We want to ensure that those who nominate candidates for electoral office are properly registered on the electoral register. The Representation of the People Bill will help in that regard. We also want to ensure that people who have the opportunity to use valuable national television and media time to put forward their political views comply properly with the law, and that they are not among those who incite racial hatred.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Will the Minister name another democratic country in which the electoral procedure and voting system in the second Chamber is effectively the patronage of the Prime Minister?

Mr. O'Brien: In asking about another country, I suspect that the hon. Gentleman is implying that that is what happens here. It is not quite like that. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman needs a lesson on the British constitution: the procedure does not work as he described.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): Does my hon. Friend accept that the provisions in the Representation of the People Bill for a rolling register and postal voting on demand amount to a huge step forward? However, will he

give further consideration to the suggestion that people who are vulnerable to domestic violence should be able to register anonymously on all published registers?

Mr. O'Brien: One of our concerns has been that the addresses of victims of domestic violence, and others, are widely available because they are on the electoral register. We are examining ways in which we can enable such people to be properly registered to vote, while ensuring that their names and addresses cannot be sold without their consent. In the past, such information has been disseminated by means of a CD-ROM given away free with a magazine, which meant that anyone wanting to find out where another person was could do so easily. The concerns expressed by my hon. Friend are very real, and I hope that we will be able to discuss them when the Bill is considered in Committee. In due course, I hope that the legislation will offer at least some protection for people in those circumstances.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): In his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers), the Minister said "It is not quite like that". If so, can he confirm that the millennium peers of whom we have heard will be appointed by the Appointments Commission, and will not be personally appointed by the Prime Minister?

Mr. O'Brien: For 18 years, the hon. Gentleman and his Conservative colleagues were quite happy to appoint various people to the House of Lords with no complaint about the process. By raising the matter only when a Labour Government are committed to modernising the constitution, they merely draw attention to their failure to do anything during those 18 years.

Prisoner Regimes

3. **Jane Griffiths** (Reading, East): How much the Government are investing in programmes to provide constructive regimes for prisoners. [99678]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The Government have a clear commitment to develop constructive regimes that reduce the risk of reoffending. The comprehensive spending review settlement included an additional £660 million for the Prison Service, a substantial part of which—£226 million—is for such regimes, including drugs, education and offending behaviour programmes.

Jane Griffiths: I thank my right hon. Friend for that welcome reply. He will be aware that Reading young offenders institution was recently commended by the inspectorate for its work in education and for having a midwife on site to assist young male inmates with parenting education. Will he join me in congratulating the YOI on that work?

Mr. Boateng: I certainly congratulate Reading YOI on its work, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the care and attention that she has given to it. The CSR allocated £200,000 to the budget in her area, and that will allow the introduction over the next year of expanded educational provision, an enhanced thinking skills course, counselling, advice, referral, assessment and throughcare support—or CARATS counselling—and a detox unit as part of a drugs strategy. The appointment of a voluntary drugs testing officer, increased time for probation bail information and capital funding for two safe cells to help to reduce suicides in custody will also make an appreciable difference to the safety of those held at Reading. Importantly, all that will also contribute to reducing the risk of reoffending. Protecting the public is what our policy is all about.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Will the Minister acknowledge that, according to the most recent Prison Service annual report, purposeful activity has declined to less than 23 hours a week on average, the lowest level since 1991?

Mr. Boateng: I can assure the right hon. Lady that we have put in place a target for 1999–2000 of 24 hours a prisoner a week, and we are well on the way to achieving that goal. This Government, rather than her own, have put moneys into constructive activity in prisons. This Government, rather than hers, have placed a real emphasis on protecting the public. We shall be remembered for that, rather than for justifying chaining pregnant women to their beds.

Miss Widdecombe: The right hon. Gentleman says that he has a target of 24 hours a week, which may be some improvement on the current 22.8 hours a week. Will he acknowledge, however, that it does not begin to match the 26 hours a week that we achieved in 1994–95?

Mr. Boateng: Year in and year out, the provision made for prisoners held under the Conservative Government failed to address the basic levels of numeracy and literacy that determine whether prisoners get jobs when they are released. We inherited a situation in which the literacy and numeracy skills of 60 per cent. of prisoners disqualified them from more than 90 per cent. of all jobs. We intend to address that situation. The Conservatives had 18 years in which do so. They did not do it, but we will.

Miss Widdecombe: May I therefore deduce from the Minister's two answers that, yes, purposeful activity is indeed at its lowest level since 1991, and that, yes, the target is two hours lower than the one we achieved during our term in Government?

Mr. Boateng *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: I am glad of the Minister's eagerness, but would he answer one more question? If purposeful activity currently fills 22.8 hours a week, it follows that most prisoners spend an average of only four hours a day in purposeful activity. This is not a trick question, and I do not require an answer to the decimal point, but can the Minister tell me roughly what percentage of the convicted population manages more than six hours a day?

Mr. Boateng: If the right hon. Lady wants an accurate answer, she will understand that I shall write to her and give her an accurate answer—to the lowest percentage decimal point. However, in the meantime, she will understand, from my answers to her questions, that we are

on the job that she palpably failed to address. Labour is delivering; she failed to do so. The public were put at risk; we are protecting the public.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Although I recognise the importance that my right hon. Friend puts on numeracy and literacy, will he undertake to review the fact that arrangements are currently not in place so that the relatively small number of long-term prisoners who have passed Open university degrees in prison can pursue postgraduate studies? They are unable to do so not through lack of facilities, but because of the lack of financial resources available to each governor. Will my right hon. Friend bear in mind that those prisoners who can show the way in such study will not only benefit themselves, but will offer an example of leadership to many other prisoners? Will he consider the matter as there is currently a deficiency?

Mr. Boateng: I would be only too happy to look at the matter and, indeed, to meet my hon. Friend if that would be of assistance.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given the revelation by the former Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, now the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), in a written answer in July 1999 to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), that prisoners will have manufactured 260,000 pairs of slippers between March 1997 and March 2000, will the Minister tell the House what assessment he and his right hon. and hon. Friends have made of the job opportunities to which that collective manufacture has led, or will lead?

Mr. Boateng: Two hundred and sixty thousand pairs of slippers, but not one of them fitted the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe).

Closed Circuit Television

4. **Mr. Ivan Henderson** (Harwich): How much money the Government are investing nationally in CCTV systems. [99679]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Under the crime reduction programme closed circuit television initiative, we are investing £153 million over three years in new or extended CCTV systems in England and Wales. A further £13 million has been allocated to Scotland and £4 million to Northern Ireland. In England and Wales, we expect to allocate about £68 million to schemes during the current financial year, with the balance to be allocated in years two and three.

The first 35 successful bids were announced last week. They were awarded £3.9 million of this year's planned £68 million. Further awards will be announced in the middle of January.

Mr. Henderson: I thank the Minister for that reply. He will be aware that, under the crime and disorder partnership, Tendring district council has put in a bid for a self-contained mobile CCTV scheme. If the bid is successful, the council expects to reduce repeat victimisation by 30 per cent., by reducing criminal damage by 100 incidents a year, and car crime by 80 incidents a year. The scheme would then be extended from towns to rural areas. Will my hon. Friend assure me that he will give the scheme his personal careful consideration? Will he also tell the House when he expects to announce further successful bids for such schemes?

Mr. Clarke: I can assure my hon. Friend that I will give the matter my close personal attention. I congratulate the Tendring crime and disorder partnership on its bid for £36,000 and the potential total capital of about £120,000. That application was one of 373 bids shortlisted to prepare final proposals. As I said earlier, the results are due to be announced in mid-January.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I am sure that the Minister will be aware of the great success of the CCTV scheme in cutting both crime and vandalism in the centre of Bromsgrove. Of course, we have the previous Conservative Government to thank for their generosity in promoting that scheme. May I implore the Labour Government to be equally generous to the people of Bromsgrove? The district council has proposed the extension of the scheme to the shopping and village areas; that would enhance the benefits of the scheme—lowering vandalism and making Bromsgrove a safer place. I implore the Minister to consider that—especially in the light of the West Mercia police force budget and the reduction in the number of constables on the streets. If we cannot have constables to police our streets, perhaps we can have CCTV instead.

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have allocated £170 million to CCTV compared with less than £39 million invested under the previous Government. I shall carefully consider the Bromsgrove scheme. I am not sure whether it is one of the 373 bids made so far, but it will be closely considered.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that that valuable capital programme is backed by current spending? There is a growing suspicion that, in many cases, CCTV systems do not contain film, are not continually monitored and that the deterrent effect on vandals and graffiti artists is being dissipated.

Mr. Clarke: I should be interested to hear specific examples of that. The schemes that I have seen have been very successful. They have demonstrated substantial revenue savings—for example, on insurance and maintenance—and they have deterred crime in the way with which the hon. Gentleman is familiar. I am not aware of general unreadiness to put revenue funding into such schemes, but, if the hon. Gentleman has specific examples of that, I shall be glad to consider them.

Norwich Prison

5. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): What assessment he has made of the level of overcrowding in Norwich prison. [99680]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The operational capacity for Norwich prison is 744. The highest population at Norwich over the last

six months was on 19 September, when 725 prisoners were in custody. The average population at Norwich during the current financial year has been 698.

Dr. Gibson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that a good general definition of overcrowding in prisons would be two prisoners in a cell designed for one? Would he further correlate the figures for overcrowding with the high suicide rates in prisons—for example, there have been 19 suicides in Norwich in the past few years? Finally, has he plans to emulate the judge in North Carolina who paraded prisoners down Main street with a placard round their necks stating what their indiscretions had been? We can think of some people in this country who might fall into that category.

Mr. Boateng: That is a very interesting suggestion and one that I should be only too happy to discuss with my hon. Friend if he wishes to introduce the North Carolina example in Norwich. It is important to recognise that prison governors have a responsibility to assess what is a safe number to hold in a particular jail and they do that by considering issues such as ventilation, light and space as well as design. In Norwich, that number has been assessed as 744 and the prison population is currently below that capacity.

It is important to ensure that we take steps within the prison population to detain prisoners in safe and decent environments, and that means giving the problems of suicide and self-harm a proper degree of priority. I do that and I know that the Attorney-General, when he was the Minister responsible for prisons, met my hon. Friend to discuss it. I continue to keep the position at Norwich under review and I pay particular tribute to the Samaritans in Norwich and to the prisoners who participate in the listeners scheme, which has shown itself able to produce positive results in reducing the impact of suicide and self-harm.

Special Constables

6. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): If he will make it his policy to increase the number of special constables. [99681]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Yes, it is. Special constables are an excellent example of the police and the public working together to tackle crime. The Government strongly support the efforts of police forces to recruit more special constables. A special constables week was held in January 1999 during which many events were held by forces around the country.

In addition, the Home Office provided £500,000 worth of local press and radio advertising for 12 forces. It has also produced a recruitment video, a series of posters and a recruitment brochure for forces.

Mr. Leigh: If all that is true, why has the number of special constables decreased by 3,000 since the general election? If the Minister wants to avoid the charge that he is simply tough on crime-fighters rather than tough on crime, will he think of some truly imaginative ways of increasing recruitment—for example, by giving special constables the same terms, conditions and pay that people in the Territorial Army receive?

Mr. Clarke: We believe that the main reason for the decline in numbers has been the higher recruiting standards that are now used for special constables. Those higher standards reflect the fact that special constables are being trained and deployed in a wider variety of duties than before, including more so-called front-line duties. The recruiting criteria are now very similar to those used for regular officers, so many applicants who previously would have been accepted in the special constabulary are now being rejected.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Does my hon. Friend agree that it was the previous Government who handed over responsibility for police figures to chief constables, and that no Government, not even a Conservative Government, could at this time guarantee the numbers of police available and operative in any town or city?

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point, which is entirely accurate. Legislation passed in 1994 by the previous Government removed from the Home Secretary the power to specify police numbers throughout the country.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): The Conservative party applauds the excellent work of special constables, but does not the Minister recognise that any extra help from specials will not plug the massive hole in front-line policing, which as today's BBC survey has revealed, consists of 3,000 unfilled posts? The pattern across the country is becoming depressingly familiar: retired officers are not replaced; vacant posts are unfilled; and recruitment plans are postponed or frozen—all to save money from overstretched budgets. What a contrast that is to the 16,000 extra police officers recruited under the Conservatives. When will the Minister face up to what everyone else in the police service can see is the worst crisis in police manpower since Labour was last in office?

Mr. Clarke: The most significant event to address that issue in recent months was my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's statement that we would be providing 5,000 extra police officers over and above the levels previously indicated. As the hon. Gentleman will know, last Thursday, we published guidance on that in which we specifically state the means by which police authorities can apply for those resources and ensure, as they could not under the previous Government's proposals, that they are used for police numbers. That is action that the Government are taking to address those issues.

Racism

8. **Mrs. Helen Brinton** (Peterborough): What steps his Department is taking to combat racism in the public sector. [99683]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): We have now published a Bill to bring all the public sector, including the police, within race relations legislation. Last week,

we also published an equality statement that set race equality within a wider strategy to ensure that the public sector promotes equality and leads by example.

Mrs. Brinton: I thank the Minister for that welcome reply. As he will know, the case of a constituent of mine has recently given me cause to look in depth at the role of race and racism in our mental health service. I was shocked to discover that everything from the first diagnosis to drug administration and the control and restraint methods employed can be directly or indirectly affected by racism. What reassurances can my hon. Friend give to the thousands of black and Asian men and women in the mental health system that racism will be tackled by the race relations Bill, which was recently announced in the Queen's Speech?

Mr. O'Brien: The Bill covers mental health patients in the same way that it covers others. Direct discrimination and victimisation of a mentally ill patient by any specified public authority in the performance of its functions, which are currently covered by the Race Relations Act 1976, will become unlawful. Discrimination against mentally ill patients in sectors already covered by the Act, such as the provision of goods, facilities and services, will of course remain unlawful.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Have the Government reached a final conclusion on the proposal from the Commission for Racial Equality that the burden of proof should be reversed in cases of alleged racial discrimination? Does not the Minister agree that to implement such a proposal would risk severely damaging, not improving, race relations in this country?

Mr. O'Brien: We will obviously take account of what the hon. Gentleman has said in reaching our conclusions. We have considered the third review of race relations legislation by the Commission for Racial Equality. It contains several proposals that we strongly support, and we are still considering other proposals, including the one referred to by the hon. Gentleman. In due course, we shall introduce our proposals on how to proceed. The key point is that the House should take a lead, both with the Bill that will shortly come before the House and with later legislation, to ensure that we create a successful, multi-racial society in Britain.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Is the Minister aware that, although welcome, the Bill's limited proposals will not necessarily tackle institutionalised racism—so powerfully identified by the Macpherson report—in some of our public services, especially the police? Has he considered whether ensuring that public services generally have the duty to promote good race relations which we have already given to the Greater London Authority might result in a better piece of legislation?

Mr. O'Brien: I do not agree that the Bill will not tackle some of the issues of institutional racism identified by the Macpherson report: the Bill is a direct response to it. However, I agree that we should consider imposing a statutory duty on public authorities to promote race equality. Indeed, last week, we announced that, in due course and when parliamentary time allows, we shall ensure that public authorities have a duty to promote race equality.

Lancashire Constabulary

9. **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde): What assessment he has made of the impact on police numbers in Lancashire of his projected financial allocations to the county's force for 2000–01. [99684]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): The provisional funding allocation for the Lancashire police authority for 2000–01 is £185.3 million. That is an increase of 3.9 per cent., which is more than the average increase for England and Wales of 2.8 per cent. Within the overall budget set by the police authority, it is for the chief officer to determine staffing levels.

Mr. Jack: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for his response, as is the Lancashire force for the additional money it is to receive for next year. However, as a Lancashire Member of Parliament, the right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the additional money will barely cover the additional costs—increases in pay, prices and the police pension fund—that the force has to bear. There is no guarantee that the crime-fighting fund will provide Lancashire with guaranteed extra resources to expand the force and recruit new officers. In the light of that financial position, will the right hon. Gentleman spell out to his home force how it is to recruit additional police officers to carry out its duties?

Mr. Straw: I will take lectures on resources for the police service from almost anyone other than those who supported the previous Administration and who now support the current Opposition Front-Bench team. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that he cannot say one thing in Lancashire and another down here. He and his right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench have criticised and damned our spending as reckless, but they speak with a forked tongue on the issue of police funding.

Let me give the right hon. Gentleman the good news regarding Lancashire police spending. First, figures with which I was provided before coming into the Chamber state that officer numbers in Lancashire are now at an all-time record level. Secondly, thanks to excellent work by the chief constable and her colleagues, crime in the area fell by 10.1 per cent. compared with a national average of 1.4 per cent.—a record that many forces would do well to emulate. Thirdly, to answer the right hon. Gentleman, I can do no better than quote the chief constable, Mrs. Pauline Clare, who said:

> "An increase of 4 per cent. is more than we expected and should be sufficient to match anticipated increases in pay and inflation. It should also help us to maintain police officer numbers."

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Although the figures show a small real-terms cash increase for Lancashire police, next year, the people of London and of Gloucestershire face a cut for the fourth year in a row—

Madam Speaker: Order. I respectfully draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that the question is about police numbers in Lancashire. Therefore, he must speak only about Lancashire, not about other areas.

Mr. Hughes: It was just how I started. Although there is to be an increase for Lancashire police for the coming year, there are many other forces that will not receive that increase and, indeed, some that will experience a fourth cut in four years. Given that the Police Federation estimates that the crime-fighting fund will not even replace countrywide—

Madam Speaker: In Lancashire.

Mr. Hughes: In Lancashire and countrywide, those who are retiring will not be replaced. Will the Home Secretary make sure that the Government concentrate less on ending the north-south divide and more on ending the divide between what they promise and what they do?

Madam Speaker: I do not require the Home Secretary to answer a question which is not related to the Question on the Order Paper. The Question is about Lancashire. We shall move on.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998

10. **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden): What consultations he has held with the Magistrates Association on the implementation of the orders made available by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [99685]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): We have consulted extensively with the Magistrates Association and individual magistrates on the implementation, in particular, of the youth justice provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Courts are participating in the pilots of the Act's new measures, to identify effective practice ahead of national implementation. As at 31 October, mainly but not exclusively in the pilot areas, I am pleased to tell the House that there have been 5,000 reprimands issued, 2,500 final warnings, 900 reparation orders, 533 action plan orders, 178 parenting orders, 10 anti-social behaviour orders and two child safety orders.

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree with me that it is essential that we encourage magistrates, the police and local authorities to consider making anti-social behaviour orders, as they provide one of the only ways of solving many of the problems that my constituents face in areas such as Pollards Hill?

Mr. Straw: Yes, the introduction of anti-social behaviour orders was not only widely welcomed but widely requested by the police and by local authorities of all political persuasions. The effectiveness of the orders, where they have been used, is striking. I quote:

"We should not underestimate too the deterrent effect of the new powers on the behaviour of others, and their potential to develop safer communities."

That was the view of Chief Inspector Royston Smith, of Derbyshire police, after he had successfully secured an anti-social behaviour order against appalling behaviour in his area.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Given that the Crime and Disorder Act was one of the Government's flagship Bills, will the Home Secretary tell us why, on the Jimmy Young show recently, he was forced to admit that he might have to consider amendments to the Act because only 10 anti-social behaviour orders and two child curfew orders have been made? Is that an example of an Act working properly to reduce crime?

Mr. Straw: The Act is indeed one of the Government's major flagships. I repeatedly meet police officers of every rank who say of the Act that it is the most welcome piece of legislation that they have been asked to implement in the whole of their careers.

The record of anti-social behaviour orders needs to be set against the outstanding success of the Act overall, including 900 reparation orders, 533 action plan orders and 178 parenting orders. The hon. Gentleman needs to explain to his constituents whether or not he is in favour of, or against, taking tough action of this kind against anti-social neighbours. If the former, he should be doing what many of my right hon. and hon. Friends are doing and asking the authorities behind the action to come forward and seek orders against the sort of appalling anti-social behaviour about which the previous Administration did nothing.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Is my right hon. Friend aware that in my constituency so far one anti-social behaviour order has been implemented? When I first discovered that, I was somewhat disappointed that more use had not been made of a very important measure. However, wider research, confirmed by my right hon. Friend's answer, shows that my constituency is somewhat in the vanguard. When I discussed the matter with my local police and the local authority, I found that they were keen to use the orders but had not always found the other bodies and agencies involved as helpful as they might have been. Will my right hon. Friend pursue that with those other bodies? The one order that has been implemented is extremely successful and is widely supported by the public. That is the way people want us to go.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We are doing everything that we can to encourage local authorities, magistrates and the police service to follow the example of the authorities in my hon. Friend's constituency in Derbyshire—and in Blackburn as well—where the obtaining of anti-social behaviour orders has proved extremely effective. I have asked my noble Friend Lord Warner, who is also chair of the Youth Justice Board, to take a particular interest in the problems faced by some authorities in seeking such orders.

Before Opposition Members sneer and get on the wrong side of the argument about dealing with anti-social behaviour, I should remind them of a number of the new offences that they trumpeted at the time the relevant legislation was going through Parliament, including the Public Order Act 1986 and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994; however, 13 years and five years

later, respectively, the number of such convictions has been fewer than five, despite all the Conservatives' bluster at the time.

What we see now, on the part of Government and of the police forces and local authorities that are in the vanguard, is a determination properly to use all the orders in the Crime and Disorder Act. The overall figures show already that the Act has been an outstanding success.

Child Curfew Orders

11. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): How many local child curfew orders have been issued under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [99686]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): None yet. It is for local authorities to decide whether to apply for confirmation of a local child curfew scheme, in the light of their work on wider crime and disorder strategies.

Mr. Loughton: Does the Minister agree that the Government's child curfew orders have been exposed as a gimmick? They did nothing in my constituency, in Shoreham and Worthing, to counter 13, 14 or 15-year-old hooligans spraying graffiti and smashing up town centres, especially following the reduction of police numbers in the county by 161. If it is true that the Home Secretary is to have another go less than a year on, and that he plans to amend the Crime and Disorder Act, will the Minister acknowledge that getting tough on youth crime requires more than soundbites and pledge cards?

Mr. Clarke: That was a fine soundbite. I do not accept that the orders are a gimmick. I must put the hon. Gentleman straight. Local child curfew orders were an additional measure to counteract public misbehaviour by children under 10, not to deal with the 13, 14 and 15-year-olds to whom the hon. Gentleman referred. Child curfew orders are one of the range of measures available to crime reduction partnerships under the Crime and Disorder Act. The range of orders being taken up and used, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary outlined, demonstrates that the partnerships have been a tremendous success in achieving co-ordination and in deterring people from activities in which they might otherwise have engaged. The hon. Gentleman should sort out whether he is for or against legislating to prevent anti-social behaviour.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): The provision for child curfews under the Crime and Disorder Act has been warmly welcomed by both police and constituents in my area. The curfews depend, of course, on successful partnerships being built up. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary referred to initiatives to find out whether problems are occurring in partnerships, but could not a more proactive approach be taken to circulate local authorities and perhaps Members of Parliament with examples of the successful working of partnerships, so that we can take forward such measures in our areas?

Mr. Clarke: What my hon. Friend suggests is welcome and correct. That was one of the proposals that we set out in our crime reduction paper, published last week. We acknowledged the truth of what my hon. Friend says: we need to do more proactively in relation to local partnerships, and give examples of draft protocols, guidelines, training, best practice and so on, to ensure that the measures available are taken up in the most effective way.

Sex Offenders

12. **Ms Margaret Moran** (Luton, South): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that *(a)* children and *(b)* other members of the public are protected from sex offenders. [99687]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The Government are committed to protecting children and others from sex offenders. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 contained strong additional safeguards in the new sex offender orders and extended supervision provisions. This Session, as part of the crime and public protection Bill, we are bringing forward proposals for a scheme to prevent unsuitable people, including sex offenders, from working with children.

Ms Moran: I welcome the measures that my right hon. Friend outlined to give priority to public protection from sex offenders—in sharp contrast to the Opposition, who did not consider the issue sufficiently serious to include it among their so-called guarantees. Is my right hon. Friend aware that there is still considerable concern about the low number of prosecutions of sex offenders in cases in which the victims are children of five and under or adults with mental incapacities? What additional protections does he propose to introduce to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are protected?

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend has a track record of concern and action in relation to the protection of very young children from such sex predators. We look to the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 to provide a range of additional safeguards for children and young people, to ensure that the court has the opportunity to receive the best evidence from them. It is vital that the courts, the Crown Prosecution Service and Victim Support work together to ensure that those wicked people are brought to justice and that our children are properly protected.

Rural Policing

13. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): What measures he is taking to reduce police response times in rural areas. [99688]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): The Government place great emphasis on improving police response times to emergency calls. At present, individual forces set their targets. The Association of Chief Police Officers is considering whether to move to a maximum 20-minute target time for all rural forces across the country. The current target time in Cheshire is 15 minutes, which is already ahead of that target. We intend to drive down the response time through the use of improved technology and more police officers, as we have already outlined.

Mr. O'Brien: As the Minister knows, police response times take, on average, twice as long in rural areas as in

urban areas. That, coupled with the closure of police stations in rural areas, exacerbates rural dwellers' increasing sense of insecurity and desperation. Why do not the Home Secretary and the Minister implement the recommendations of the Home Office report on rural police funding? Does the Minister agree that his decision is yet another example of the Government's antagonism towards those who live in rural areas?

Mr. Clarke: That is nonsense, although I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his first contribution to Home Office questions. The facts for the Cheshire police are clear: they received an increase of £4.7 million—a 4.1 per cent. increase, which is well above the national average—and 28 extra officers. The force numbers are therefore increasing.

The Government are strongly committed to dealing with rural crime. We have established a series of measures, including those on reducing response times, which, I acknowledge to the hon. Gentleman, are an important aspect of community confidence in rural areas. We shall continue to drive forward the changes, which, I further acknowledge, are very necessary.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My hon. Friend may not be aware that there has been a sudden spate in rural areas of thefts of such expensive items as 4x4s and tractors. That causes alarm. However, my hon. Friend may also like to acknowledge that those in the rural area around Nantwich, especially the officers at Nantwich police station, are doing a tremendous job which is greatly appreciated by those who are most affected. When I accidentally set off the alarms in a Cheshire county council library on Saturday, the police responded at twice the speed of the relevant private security firm.

Mr. Clarke: I might have known that my hon. Friend was precisely the sort of dangerous, anti-social element that the Government are trying to tackle—in several different contexts. I am grateful for her contribution. In many parts of the country, the farm watch initiatives, which cover some of the farm equipment that my hon. Friend mentioned, have been effective. They are another consequence of effective local crime reduction partnerships.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Is not the problem the fact that patrolling in rural areas is virtually non-existent, and that the thin blue line has become extremely thin in much of rural Britain? Given the problems that we have already discussed, such as difficulties in recruiting, training, equipping and retaining special constables, would it not be an idea to examine the policy on fire brigades, which is covered by the other half of the Home Office operation, and consider retained constables?

Mr. Clarke: I do not accept for a moment what the hon. Gentleman says about patrolling in rural areas, but I accept that there is a lot of interest in rural neighbourhood special constables or retained constables, and those issues are worth pursuing. Some rural forces have a strong local special constable presence, which is an example that we are looking at carefully across the country; and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State and I are carefully considering ways in which not only the fire service but the ambulance service can work with the police to ensure that there is a strong community safety element in rural areas.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

14. **Mr. Nigel Beard** (Bexleyheath and Crayford): If he will list the anti–social behaviour orders *(a)* granted by the courts and *(b)* currently applied for. [99689]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Information on the number of anti-social behaviour orders granted or in progress is not held centrally, but I am aware of 10 ASBOs made to date. Orders have been granted in north Somerset—which my hon. Friends will be grateful to hear is a Conservative council area—Liverpool, Derbyshire, Redditch, Camden, Blackburn, Coventry and Waveney. They are a new weapon to help the police and local authorities to tackle anti-social behaviour in the community. We are giving more impetus to that work, and are setting up an action group to achieve that and to ensure that the police and local authorities have the confidence to take action quickly and efficiently.

Mr. Beard: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Is he aware that some of the delay involved in serving anti-social behaviour orders arises from difficulties with establishing the requisite evidence, either because the complaints are not sufficiently specific or because of intimidation or improvements in behaviour when inquiries are known to be afoot? Will he consider ways in which those difficulties might be overcome?

Mr. Clarke: Certainly I will. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said earlier, we are learning how best to address the evidential issues. We are considering ideas such as the use of portable videos in particular areas to strengthen the evidential basis of action, and we are talking to local authorities and police across the country to learn from their experience how we can give better guidance to ensure that there is much higher take-up of ASBOs. I hope that all Members of the House will encourage their local authorities and police to take up ASBOs in the most effective way.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): The Minister may read out a list of individual local authorities that have made orders, but is not the reality that pitifully few have been issued? Does he not recall that the Government promised that this measure was their way of addressing disorder in estates up and down the country? Should he not accept that the courts, the police and the local authorities have found the orders difficult to operate? Would not it be sensible to invite Lord Warner, as part of the review that the Home Secretary has announced, to consider the legal character of the orders? Instead of blaming civil rights lawyers, local authorities and Uncle Tom Cobbleigh and all, the Government should look at the nature of the orders, because that is where the defects arise. They will have to accept responsibility for that deficiency.

Mr. Clarke: I have already said, as has my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, that we intend to provide much stronger guidance, stronger guidelines and better protocols to address those issues. I am acutely conscious that Hertsmere is not one of the authorities that have so far

issued an ASBO, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman has been doing his best to persuade it and local police to use one in his constituency.

Stasi Spies

17. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): What steps are being taken to investigate British Stasi spies, information about whom has been discovered in the Berlin Stasi archive. [99692]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): As part of its remit under the Security Service Act 1989, the Security Service has investigated, and continues to investigate, British citizens and some others recorded in the East German intelligence service's records as having worked for the Stasi. Those investigations were, and are, handled in the same way as other similar investigations.

Dr. Lewis: I thank the Home Secretary for that reply, but unfortunately it does not accord with the information at my disposal on this matter, which I first raised in the House more than a month ago. My information is that the Berlin archive of the Stasi has not been visited by investigators from this country; Dr. Anthony Glees, the senior lecturer who discovered in that archive the detailed material incriminating Dr. Robin Pearson, the would-be university recruiter for the Stasi, has still not been interviewed by the police or the Security Service; and, as far as is known, the material that was given to the BBC, which formed the basis of the programme that brought this matter to public attention, has still not been examined. Is he assuring the House that that material has already been examined? If not, when will it be examined?

Mr. Straw: The House will understand that I cannot speak about the information available to the hon. Gentleman, but only about that available to me.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): A poor substitute.

Mr. Straw: If this will reassure the hon. Gentleman— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I am afraid I heard that aside rather later than the rest of the House.

Mr. Straw: I will not attempt to follow that, Madam Speaker.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the records have revealed many leads in cases involving the investigation of more than 100 individuals.

Community Sentences

18. **Maria Eagle** (Liverpool, Garston): What measures he proposes to increase the confidence of the public and the courts in the use of community sentences. [99693]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The public need to be satisfied that community sentences are effective and properly enforced. We are improving the quality and effectiveness of probation service work through the "what works" initiative, and we are tightening enforcement procedures through work with the Association of Chief Officers of Probation and through more rigorous national standards.

Maria Eagle: Given that reconviction rates following the imposition of custodial sentences are about the same as reconviction rates following the imposition of community sentences, does my right hon. Friend believe that the courts have got the balance of sentencing about right, or does he think that community sentences should be used more regularly by the courts?

Mr. Boateng: It is important to examine those statistics with great care, because they are compiled on a different basis. We are determined to ensure that community and custodial sentences are better informed as to content, and that the protection of the public lies at the heart of both.

Crime and Disorder Partnerships

19. **Mrs. Sylvia Heal** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): If he will make a statement on the level of activity of crime and disorder partnerships. [99694]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The crime and disorder reduction partnerships brought into being by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 published their strategies on 1 April 1999 and are currently implementing them. We recently published a crime reduction strategy, which includes measures to support and develop partnerships' effectiveness .

Mrs. Heal: Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the establishment of many partnerships around the country? That shows the Government's commitment to getting all parts of our communities working together to tackle crime and disorder. Will he congratulate Sandwell metropolitan borough council in my constituency, where two anti-burglary initiatives have produced a significant reduction in domestic burglary rates in recent months? I hope that he and his colleagues will look favourably on a bid by the Halesowen Highfields estate for CCTV, so that it, too, may benefit from a reduction in crime.

Mr. O'Brien: I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the work that is being done in Sandwell. I also agree with her that the work of crime and disorder reduction partnerships is enormously important. It will be one of the most significant contributions that there has been to tackling the problems of crime and disorder in this country. On the CCTV application, she will already have heard in earlier questions that we are putting a considerable amount of funding into that, and all applications will be considered.

Oakington Detention Centre

21. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): When Oakington detention centre will be opened. [99696]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): We are aiming to open the centre early in the new year, but it is likely to take a few months to build up to full capacity.

Mr. Corbyn: I thank the Minister for that answer. What details about the administration of the Oakington detention

centre will be made public, and how many people will be detained in it throughout its life? Does she accept that many people in this country and in other parts of the world find it fundamentally disgraceful that this country still imprisons a large number of asylum seekers? Ours is the only country in Europe routinely to hold asylum seekers in detention.

Mrs. Roche: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. We detain about 1 per cent. of asylum seekers. The centre will have the capacity to take up to 400 people, but we expect to build it up gradually. It will be a reception facility that will process straightforward applications—we are talking about a seven-day period. The question that my hon. Friend must ask himself is how European Union countries deal with unfounded asylum cases, because they all face that problem. We must have this system in place to deal properly with genuine refugees and to progress their cases.

IT Projects

22. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): How many information technology projects currently being implemented, for which his Department is responsible, are behind schedule. [99697]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The hon. Gentleman has raised an enormously important issue. Eleven of the 17 major projects currently under way are expected to complete, or did complete, later than the date originally estimated. Timetables and milestones are kept continually under review. Currently, following updated reviews, all Home Office information technology projects are on target.

Mr. Heath: I thank the Minister for his answer, but the situation is a bit of a shambles, and it is costing the country a lot of money. In a week during when we shall discuss the Freedom of Information Bill, would it not be appropriate for the Minister to place in the Library the terms of the contracts and the penalties payable by the IT companies, so that we can all see what the Government are doing on our behalf?

Mr. O'Brien: We have said that we will seek to be as open as possible in regard to the contracts that have already been signed. As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, they were signed on the basis of certain conditions and criteria, and obviously we shall be bound by the contracts that currently exist; but as we have said, our policy will be to be as open as we can in making available the contents of future contracts.

Many private sector projects have experienced some difficulties. The public sector deals with matters on a larger scale; as a result, the opportunities for problems to arise are inevitably greater.

Passports

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement to explain why passport fees are to increase by £7 to £28 for the standard passport, and by £3.80 to £14.80 for the child's passport. I am also publishing the Passport Agency's corporate and business plan for 1999-2002, together with a separate recovery plan. I am placing both documents in the Library of the House and the Vote Office.

As the House is aware, the agency encountered major problems last summer. I greatly regret the severe inconvenience caused to the public, and repeat my apology for what happened. However, the emergency measures that I authorised in the summer have proved effective. Turnround times for passport applications have been within 10 working days since August. Currently, all offices are processing work within a maximum of four working days. The current total backlog is 47,000 applications, which represents about four days' work.

A report from the National Audit Office, published in October, found that £12.6 million had been incurred meeting the exceptional costs involved in remedying the situation that arose in the summer. I think the whole House would accept that it would not be right for those costs to be met by a fee increase, and I have therefore agreed with the agency's new chief executive that they will be met instead by a programme of efficiency savings.

The NAO report also makes it clear that some fundamental changes are necessary to improve the quality and reliability of the agency's service to the public. To effect those changes will require significant investment, and that investment is the reason for the increase in the passport fee, given that successive Governments have rightly determined that the agency must be self-financing.

The passport service became an executive agency in 1991, a change that has undoubtedly delivered improvements. Although the agency has been successful in driving down unit costs, its record for customer service has been less consistent. As the NAO report makes it clear, some of the causes of last summer's problems were deep-rooted. Although the agency has sought to reduce the maximum time taken to process applications from the four-week norm in 1991, it has had problems in consistently delivering the more recent two-week target.

From the early 1990s until last summer, the time taken to process applications has risen significantly above two weeks to a maximum of about four weeks in the busy season each year. As a result, there have been queues at passport offices each summer and increasing problems in responding to a rising volume of telephone inquiries.

Our strategy for the agency takes full account of the NAO report and seeks to deal with those problems. New performance targets are to be set to ensure that the two-week turnround means what it says throughout the year. To ensure that the agency can, in practice, meet those targets, I have agreed to increase its capacity by 25 per cent. to enable it to issue an additional 1.3 million passports each year. That extra capacity will be met by the opening of a new regional office for the north-east of England and by a 30 per cent. expansion of the existing Peterborough office. The new north-east office will create 500 additional jobs and be based in Durham. The Peterborough expansion will mean the creation of an extra 100 jobs.

Other improvements are to be made. From March next year, there will be earlier opening and later closing for all the agency's offices, and Saturday opening as well. That is aimed to deliver a 45-minute maximum waiting target. The renovation of public counter areas in all offices will take place. From next July, a new public counter service will be provided at the new office in Durham. The London passport office will be relocated in spring 2001 to Bridge place, adjacent to Victoria station, where there will be major improvements in facilities for the public. The forms and accompanying notes are to be redesigned to make them more customer-friendly and to reduce error rates. Payment options will be improved and the quality of the telephone inquiry service is being raised.

A new call centre is being established in Bristol involving the creation of a further 60 jobs. The agency is being set a target of answering 90 per cent. of calls within 20 seconds, seven days a week, throughout the year. No more than one call in 50 should receive an engaged tone even at the busiest time of year. Demand forecasting and contingency and manpower planning are being strengthened to ensure that the agency can cope better with unexpected fluctuations of demand and other uncertainties in the process.

Changes have been made to improve the operation of the new computer system, but only when Ministers and the new chief executive are satisfied with the productivity of the new system as implemented at Newport and Liverpool will that system be extended to the other offices, and then only on a phased basis.

Altogether, that investment will cost an estimated £25 million per year. As I have already informed the House, the fee for a standard adult passport with 10-year validity will therefore be increased by £7 to £28. The fee for a child's passport for five years will be increased by £3.80 to £14.80. The fee for amending a passport will be increased by £6 to £17. The additional fee for customers seeking a personal service at the agency's offices will be increased by £2 to £12. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has decided that the higher fees that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office charges for passports issued by its British posts abroad will also increase. All those changes will come into effect on Thursday 16 December.

I naturally understand that fee increases are never popular. However, the increases have been restricted to the minimum that we judge necessary to ensure that the crucial improvements that I have described are delivered. I do not anticipate the need for any further increase in fees for at least two years.

Even with the increase, the fee for a British passport is among the lowest in the world and will remain well below the level of other countries where, like the UK, there is no taxpayer subsidy. For example, the equivalent 10-year adult passport fee is £34.50 in the United States, £46 in Canada, £47.50 in Australia and £74 in France.

The fee increase should ensure that the agency is put on a proper financial footing and is able to put in train the essential improvements to customer service. It will help to ensure that this year's problems do not recur, that the

[Mr. Jack Straw]

modernisation programme is driven forward and that the agency is able to provide a significantly improved service to the public.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): When will the right hon. Gentleman stop persecuting the ordinary applicant for a British passport? His announcements today, which will come into effect on 16 December, will do nothing other than convince the average applicant that the spirit of Ebenezer Scrooge lives on. Will he confirm that it will now cost a family consisting of mother, father and two children £85 for their passports; that that is an increase of one third, or £21; and that, for those seeking a simple amendment to a passport, the increase is more than 50 per cent?

Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the new computer system was chosen and signed for by the Under-Secretary of State for Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), and that, according to a National Audit Office report, the new system will deliver no more than the old system was capable of delivering?

Does the right hon. Gentleman to this day take any direct responsibility for the fiasco that arose over the summer, given the decision to implement the new rules on child passports at the same time as the new computer system was being installed? We are now told, moreover, that the new computer system was not really going to do anything more than the old system.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned efficiency savings. Will he confirm that the background papers—which he has given me with the statement, and for which I thank him—suggest that there will be no efficiency savings in the years 2000 or 2001? Are we therefore to believe that none of the fee increase is to pay for the past fiasco, as there will be no efficiency savings for at least two years?

Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that, despite his own assertion that the Passport Agency's revised business plan was considered on 27 September by his advisory board, two months later, on 23 November, his own Minister in the Lords was claiming not to have seen it? That is of course the same Minister who recently announced in another place a set of police figures which, days earlier, had been repudiated by the Home Secretary.

I have to ask the right hon. Gentleman, and not for the first time, what is going on in the Home Office. I know that he will tell me, as he has done in the past, that it is business as usual. He will be aware that I have always eschewed the practice of calling for ministerial resignations—*[Laughter.]* I have. However, in the light of what he has told the House, and the costs to British passport applicants of putting right the results of the fiasco that he—and he alone by his decisions—produced, does he not think that the time has come at least to consider the position of the Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State for Home Affairs, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) and Lord Bassam?

Mr. Straw: As I have always explained to the House, I have never suggested that my stewardship of the Department would be perfect. However, my stewardship of the Home Office is different in at least two important respects from that of the previous Administration.

The first major difference is that we as Ministers accept responsibility for anything that happens in our Department, including the Department's agencies. That contrasts very starkly with the way in which the right hon. Lady and other Ministers in the previous Government used to try to dance on the head of a pin to distinguish between policy, for which they were responsible, and operations, for which someone else was always to blame.

I have already said that I was responsible for the problems that arose last summer—I told the House that at the end of June. I am very sorry that the problems happened, and we sought immediately to put them right. I will take criticism from a great many people about what happened, but I will not take it from someone who served in the Home Office in the previous Administration.

I remind the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) that the worst delays last summer—which were totally unacceptable—were 50 working days. That compares favourably with what happened when she and her right hon. Friends introduced a new computer system in 1989-90 when—thanks to industrial action, which they provoked, the delays were not 50 days, but 95 days. It then took four and a half months.

I regret fee increases of this kind, and the fact that holidaymakers will have to pay for them. However, our judgment has been that we must avoid a recurrence of the difficulties which arose last year. The NAO report—for which my colleagues and I were grateful—exposed the fact that, although the Passport Agency had been successful in driving down unit costs, underlying problems were in some ways obscured by that apparent success. We therefore had to increase capacity and ensure that other improvements were made to the standard of service offered to the public.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald asked about efficiency savings. I hope that she is not challenging my word on this: as I have said, the £12.5 million cost identified as that arising from last summer's problems will be met not from a fee increase but from efficiency savings.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): Does my right hon. Friend understand that, although no one likes fee increases, there will be a general welcome if—on the back of the extra investment that he has announced this afternoon—there is an improvement in the efficiency of the service? May I tell him also that he will be judged on the way in which the service is delivered or not? Will he think about a simpler and cheaper system of travel document for those who wish to take holidays only in other European Union countries?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. Our judgment—which I hope will be shared by the House, despite the increase—is that what holidaymakers and other travellers want above all is a guarantee that when they apply for a passport, they get one. In addition, to fit in with differences in working times and so on, if someone phones up outside traditional office hours, they will get a proper answer, and a swifter answer than before. I accept that we and the agency will be judged on whether the improvements in service are delivered.

There was a modified and simpler form of travel document, which was withdrawn—I believe correctly—by the previous Administration in 1995 or 1996. That was

a British visitor's passport, which was available over the counter in post offices. The difficulty with it was that it was insecure and open to forgery and other fraud. For that reason, it had to be withdrawn.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I welcome the proposals for a more customer-friendly system, and I ask the Home Secretary to pass on our thanks to the staff of the Passport Agency, who have recovered speedily from the fiasco of the summer and are now processing passports quickly. Clearly, a one-third increase is not a Christmas present to which anyone will look forward. Has such a large increase ever been announced in the history of passport charges imposed by Government?

How can the Home Secretary say—as he did in a letter the other day—that the National Audit Office has said that in recent years the Passport Agency has achieved great efficiency savings, while at the same time saying that there is scope for further efficiency savings to raise the £12 million-odd with which he says the increased passport fee has nothing to do?

Given that the blessed computer system appears to be two years behind schedule and £20 million overrun in costs and that, according to answers that the Home Secretary gave me, 13 of the 17 Home Office main IT projects are either overrun in cost or behind schedule or both, can the contracts for those 17 systems be put in the public domain—this follows the question asked earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath)—so that there is no secrecy and we can judge whether the blame lies with the Home Office or the IT company or both?

Mr. Straw: I accept that the increases are unpalatable, but they are not dissimilar to increases that took place under the previous Administration. For example, the fee for a driving licence rose in 1996 from £21 to £27. The percentage increase that the previous Administration imposed when they increased the passport fee by £4, from £11 to £15, was bigger than the one that I have just announced.

We are confident that we can meet the demand for efficiency savings over a period—more than one or two years—and that they will be achievable within the business plan, not least because of a high and improved level of service.

The issue of contracts is difficult. I will certainly consider what further information can be provided. When I was in opposition, I took the view that the maximum information about contracts should be provided, and I have not changed that view, but there are issues of commercial confidentiality involved and, understandably, companies signing contracts with public authorities—sometimes for justifiable reasons, but sometimes for unjustifiable reasons—want parts of those contracts to remain confidential. The NAO report gives considerable information about the income forgone that Siemens has had to take, as well as the Passport Agency.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): I welcome the measures that my right hon. Friend took earlier this year and the confirmation that they have been effective in shifting the backlog, and I am glad that applications now take an average of 10 days, but that is in sharp contrast to the response from the chief executive of the UKPA to correspondence. I wrote to him on 1 November and 35 days later I am still waiting for so much as an acknowledgment. I wrote on behalf of a constituent seeking compensation for a cancelled holiday. How many such cases have been settled and how many remain outstanding? If necessary, will my right hon. Friend take steps to ensure that the process is accelerated?

Mr. Straw: I will follow up the point about correspondence, because letters should be replied to far more promptly than that.

Total compensation paid to members of the public for missed travel dates and other expenses amounted at the end of October to £161,000, but it is likely to rise further as outstanding claims are settled.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): The hon. Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) and I will welcome the extra jobs in Peterborough. Has the Home Secretary yet written personally to those who work in the Peterborough passport office to apologise for the anger and opprobrium that they had to suffer last summer as a result of his incompetence? Is it not true that that incompetence is in part the reason for the swingeing increases announced today?

Mr. Straw: The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), went one better than simply writing to the staff at Peterborough. He went there and thanked them. I think—I am not absolutely sure, so I will check—that I wrote a message to staff thanking them very much for the unquestionable work that they did and for the fact that, as I observed in passport office front counters in London and Liverpool, they had to deal with a lot of members of the public who were understandably very cross and upset. I thanked them personally and I believe that I did so in writing as well.

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement. Does he agree that the 100 welcome new jobs and the drop in unemployment in Peterborough from 11.4 per cent. when we took over in 1997 to only 6.3 per cent. today, after two years of Labour Government, is evidence of the Government's excellent record on getting people back to work? *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members may jeer and shake their heads, but they cannot deny that under this Government unemployment is at a record low and the country's finances are healthier than they ever were under the Tories. Is it not exactly that economic prosperity and stability that is allowing the sort of investment that my right hon. Friend has just announced?

Mr. Straw: I thank my hon. Friend for those remarks. Although in some ways I regret the circumstances, I am delighted that that change in the structure of, and the investment in, the United Kingdom Passport Agency will lead to the creation of an additional 100 jobs in my hon. Friend's constituency and another 500 jobs in Durham city, in County Durham. Of course I accept what my hon. Friend says about the dramatic improvement in prosperity and the reduction in unemployment that has taken place in Peterborough under my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's stewardship of the economy.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Although I welcome the fact that the

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

Passport Agency seems here a painful inch to gain—to misquote Clough—will the Home Secretary turn his mind to the travel section of the immigration and nationality directorate, from which we can get neither particular answers on behalf of constituents nor general answers about the present state of the section?

Mr. Straw: If the right hon. Gentleman is talking about the issue of travel documents for stateless people, I can tell him that as a result of changes that have been made in the production process at Croydon, output of those documents has increased by some 500 per cent. That is a dramatic change. As far as other aspects of the administration of the immigration and nationality directorate are concerned, we are putting extra staff into Croydon. I understand the problems that have arisen, because—like the right hon. Gentleman—I have a large constituency case load of people who have tried to correspond with Croydon. I have asked the office to ensure that I get no better treatment than anyone else, and I can guarantee that I do not.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend, in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett), the new Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, pointed to difficulties with the British visitor's passport, which led to its withdrawal in 1995. Will my right hon. Friend revisit that decision? Why do not we take a pan-European approach and adopt a national identity card that would include data such as medical data and could then—subject to negotiation—be used throughout the European Union? Such a card is inevitable, so why not grasp the nettle now and seek its early introduction?

Mr. Straw: I fully understand that Members on both sides of the House have varying views on the issue of national identity cards. I have examined the issue with great care, and our view is that a national identity card would not be appropriate. It is a different matter to improve national records, which would be of some assistance. Part of the problem of having a national identity card, if we take the example of member states of the Schengen system, is that it requires a change in the powers of the police in place of border controls, so that they can demand the production of the card without any other cause. That would not be acceptable to British citizens, and our approach of having proper border controls is more effective in many respects. Of course, I am willing to continue to engage in the debate with my hon. Friend.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Would the Home Secretary consider what appears to be an unfair situation? Many thousands of us—I declare an interest—sought to have our passports renewed earlier this year and were given, exceptionally, a two-year extension. Does the right hon. Gentleman think it right that those people should have to pay the new fee for renewal of their passports instead of the fee they would have paid had they been able to have it renewed earlier?

Mr. Straw: We made that arrangement to relieve the pressure on passport offices, and it was successful. The result for the hon. Gentleman is that he has had two years' free extension of his passport. I do not begrudge him that, but it is not too bad a result.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Will my right hon. Friend exonerate those hundreds of my constituents who work in the Newport passport office from any blame for last summer's chaos? They—and staff in other passport offices elsewhere—faced the brunt of public criticism and responded magnificently, working long hours for little reward. They will be disappointed that their service and loyalty were not recognised today with the announcement that more people would be employed at the office. They will be further disappointed if the promised efficiencies mean that their jobs are under threat.

Does not the passport saga shake my right hon. Friend's faith in the omnipotence of high-tech and in the value of public-private partnerships? We are told that those partnerships represent the way forward, and that many public service activities must be outsourced to the private sector. Could not more efficiencies be gained through insourcing, so that work carried out in the public sector could be enhanced by the taking on of work that is performed less efficiently in the private sector?

Mr. Straw: I want to do far more than exonerate staff in the Newport passport office and elsewhere: I want to praise them for the way in which they dealt with a very difficult problem.

My hon. Friend will know that there is a history of large-scale computer systems not quite working out according to plan, in the private sector as well as in the public sector. At all stages, we have to try and learn from what has happened. I refer my hon. Friend to what happened with the introduction of the new payments system at the stock exchange, which was an entirely private sector operation. I am glad to see wry smiles on the faces of the hon. Members for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), as hundreds of millions of pounds were wasted when the system at the centre of our economic arrangements almost collapsed.

When it comes to new information technology systems, the precise boundary between private and public sectors can be arguable. However, because the Government are not in the business of computer manufacture and supply and have no plans to go into that business, we must have a relationship with the private sector. The decision to be made has to do with what the best relationship is, and whether it is most likely to ensure that the private sector also bears part of the risk involved with the systems that it supplies.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I thank the Home Secretary for taking so seriously the work done by the National Audit Office in this matter. I also welcome the fact that the cost of this year's shambles—some £12 million—is to be met out of efficiency savings, rather than by the taxpayer or the holidaymaker. However, I presume that those efficiency savings will be on-going, whereas the cost was a one-off. I also presume that the management of the agency will make further efficiency savings, and that unit costs will fall as volumes increase and capacity use rises. I also believe that, because the volumes involved are higher than when the contract with Siemens was first negotiated, that contract should be

renegotiated. Will the Home Secretary undertake to ensure that the Passport Agency pursues all those cost savings, and that it will return the money saved to the holidaymaker in the form of reduced fees in the future?

Mr. Straw: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he said. We certainly take the NAO's work seriously, and I am grateful for the insights that it gave me into the working of the Passport Agency and the problems that had to be dealt with to ensure that the agency was put on a proper and sound footing.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the Siemens contract. Discussions with that company about the nature of the relationship are continuing, and I shall write to the right hon. Gentleman about that. I have given the best information that I can on the overall cost of the investment, which is running at about £24 million, and have explained the consequent need for a fee increase. Of course it is our hope that we can get unit costs down, but such a reduction will be from a higher level than previously, as we are asking customers to pay for a higher level of service. Whether we can, as the right hon. Gentleman suggests, achieve a virtuous circle that would allow us to reduce the fee in future, rather than its rising, is something about which I am a little sceptical, but we live in hope. If the right hon. Gentleman wants more information, I shall be happy to write to him.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I, too, have a vested interest, as my passport appears to have been stolen at Heathrow last Wednesday. I should say how extraordinarily efficient and courteous were both our immigration service and that of the United States of America. Our embassy in Washington was also extremely helpful, as were the staff of British Airways.

Will my right hon. Friend ensure maximum co-operation with the Post Office so that the widest availability of passport application forms can be achieved? That would be a practical way in which to help rural post offices while also providing a better service to constituents in rural areas.

Mr. Straw: I thank my hon. Friend for those remarks. Staff in the immigration and nationality directorate, the immigration service and the Passport Agency are more used to receiving brickbats than bouquets, and it is nice to hear hon. Members praise them, entirely justifiably. I shall ensure that my hon. Friend's compliments are passed on.

We shall ensure better availability of passport forms. An arrangement with partners of the Passport Agency—principally, though not exclusively, the Post Office—allows customers to pay an additional fee to ensure that their applications are checked for errors before going into the system earlier than would otherwise be the case. The fee is £3.25, and there will be no increase on 16 December, although it may be increased next April.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Some people will see today's swingeing increase in charges as the imposition of a new tax—an identity tax. The Home Secretary has announced the creation of 600 new jobs at a cost of £250,000 each every year to improve service in the Passport Agency. If the agency's time targets are not met, what compensation will be available to applicants?

Mr. Straw: The Conservatives are a bit like the Bourbons, except that they have forgotten everything and learned nothing. As the right hon. Gentleman is obviously suffering from amnesia, I remind him that he was a Treasury Minister when the Conservatives raised taxes not once or twice but 22 times. One of those taxes was an airport tax—a real tax on travellers. Today's increase is not a tax but a raised fee to provide an improved service.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Does the right hon. Gentleman realise that his use of "investment" must be spurious? The word implies positive anticipated return by efficiency savings or some other means. If there are genuine efficiency savings, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) is right to say that the unit cost of providing the service should come down. The fact that the Home Secretary does not anticipate a reduction in cost means that this measure is not an investment. He is misusing language. Would it not be good for the country if he thought a little more rigorously, which might help him to act more straightforwardly?

Mr. Straw: I bow to the hon. Gentleman's superior business acumen, but there is no question but that this is an investment of £24 million a year to provide an improved level of service. It is there to deal with the underlying problems that were properly identified by the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee—I am grateful to them. Although the public will not find the increases especially palatable—neither do I—I think that they would prefer a balance so that, for a relatively higher fee, they are guaranteed a proper service with a swifter response from the agency. Furthermore, they will receive a modern service that takes account of the fact that people no longer work nine to five; they work different hours and they want a different response from public services.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): May I take this opportunity to thank the Home Secretary for his assistance in the eventual processing of passport applications from my constituents Sarah Crisp, Elizabeth Scott and Alice Wright, and, through him, thank the UK Passport Agency? However, in view of the swingeing increases in fees that he has announced, will he give me the assurance, which I have previously sought but which was not forthcoming, that where an individual is obliged to make an initial or an extra visit in person to a passport office as a direct result of the tardiness or incompetence of the UK Passport Agency, that individual's reasonable travel costs will be reimbursed without question?

Angela Smith (Basildon): They are.

Mr. Bercow: They are not.

Mr. Straw: It is my recollection that, during the summer, if individuals who applied for compensation had had to make a second or a third unavoidable journey to a passport office, that was included in the payment that they received. If I am wrong about that, I shall write to the hon. Gentleman.

We very much hope that the changes will ensure that the turnround is effective even at times of greatly increased demand. I am extremely grateful to the

[Mr. Straw]

hon. Gentleman not only for his words of thanks to me—I do not deserve them—but to the staff of the agency, who do deserve them.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): The Home Secretary's reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) was limp-wristed and woolly. If there is major investment in a new system, there must be efficiency savings. Will the right hon. Gentleman make it his job to ensure that savings are passed on to the afflicted members of the public on whom today's huge increase has been imposed?

Mr. Straw: As I pointed out, this increase, proportionately, is marginally less than that imposed by the Conservative Administration in 1983. Although I fully understand that it will not be popular with members of the public, the last people—as ever—who should complain about an increase of that size are members of the Conservative party. If there are savings in the future that can properly be passed on to the members of the public, they will be passed on. My answer to the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden was not limp-wristed; it was careful. In the House of Commons it is extremely important that we do not give undertakings that we cannot deliver.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): As the Government try so readily to borrow management speak and business speak, is the irony lost on the Home Secretary that the Passport Agency holds a monopolistic position—by definition, one cannot obtain a passport from anywhere else—and that an inflationary increase of this size would, by any test, be an abuse of a monopolistic position? If the right hon. Gentleman is to borrow from business speak, perhaps he should now consider that what you measure is what you get. As part of the thanks to the Passport Agency staff—expressed by Members on both sides of the House—perhaps the staff should be given an incentive bonus payment for what they have managed to do. That would also ensure that they are incentivised in future.

Mr. Straw: At the end of this debate on the statement, and after the preceding Home Office Question Time, we shall, as usual, go away and add up the total costs to which Opposition Members have committed themselves—against a background in which they have damned our spending as "reckless".

Let me make two points to the hon. Gentleman. The first is that the staff of the Passport Agency worked extremely hard last summer, and, in recognition of that, they rightly received significant overtime payments. Secondly, in spotting the fact that the issuing of passports is a monopoly, the hon. Gentleman displays those economic insights known only to Conservative Members. The issue of passports is a monopoly; I know of nowhere in the world where it is other than a monopoly exercised by the state.

Points of Order

4.15 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Following the serious announcement at the weekend that the World Trade Organisation talks had collapsed in a shambles and today's press announcements that the British Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is to take a lead role in restoring the situation, have you received any request from the right hon. Gentleman to the effect that he wishes to come to the House to share with us and, through us, with British business, the way in which the Government intend to take the lead role in restoring what is now a very serious matter?

Madam Speaker: No. I have not been informed by Ministers that they seek to make a statement. Perhaps I can refer the hon. Lady to the Order Paper for Thursday of this week when, on a motion for the Adjournment, the very subject in which she is interested will be there for debate by the entire House.

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will be aware that hon. Members from both sides of the House may seek to amend on a non-political basis the Government Resources and Accounts Bill so as to guarantee the rights of the House. You will also know that the Bill's long title says that it will

"Make provision about government resources and accounts . . . and for connected purposes."

It has been intimated that there is some confusion at an official level and that some officials think that we are circumscribed by the long title. Will you confirm that the reason why the long title is the last part of a Bill to face amendment is to ensure that the long title can be brought into line with amendments that have been made in Committee and on Report?

Madam Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving me a little notice of his point of order. The House knows, however, that the Speaker never gives hypothetical rulings. By inviting me to give a firm ruling at this stage on the technical scope of the Bill, he is effectively inviting me to prejudice decisions that have to be made by the Chairman of the Standing Committee and not by me. I suggest that he uses his skill, his experience and, I know, his ingenuity as well as his knowledge of the Clerks in the Public Bill Office, to secure the objectives that he has in mind.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will be aware from reports in the written press and the broadcast media of elderly patients having food and water withheld as a result of the lack of national health service beds. Those reports will have been met with horror and disbelief inside the House and beyond. Given that they have come from eminent consultants and from patients' groups, there needs to be a full inquiry. Should not the Secretary of State for Health ask to make a statement on that matter, and could not time be made available for it during today's proceedings given that people must now wonder what sort of culture we live

in when all the stops can be pulled out to provide a dome for our entertainment but when the necessities of life are withheld from our elderly patients?

Madam Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, I shall not comment on the political issue that he has raised, but I can tell him, as I am sure he knows, that no Minister is coming to the House today to make a statement on it. May I respectfully draw his attention and that of his hon. Friends to the fact that, tomorrow, they can table parliamentary questions to the Secretary of State for Health, for answer before the House rises for the Christmas recess?

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. At about half-past 10 this morning, a Cabinet Office report relating to the north-south divide was given to the media. At 4 o'clock this afternoon, it was still not available in the Vote Office, although throughout the day the media have been asking Members with a constituency interest in the north for their comments. Could you in future ensure that the Cabinet Office makes such documents available to Members at the same time as it does to the media?

Madam Speaker: It probably is an important document, and I shall consider the matter. This is the first time I have been made aware of the document, but if the hon. Gentleman leaves the matter with me, I shall make some inquiries.

Orders of the Day

Government Resources and Accounts Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

4.19 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is a major milestone on the way to full implementation of the biggest reform and modernisation of the management of the country's public finances since Gladstone's time. Resource accounting and budgeting is a vital part of our modernisation agenda and demonstrates the Government's commitment to introduce best practice accounting methods in line with the code for fiscal stability.

Before I go into the detail of the Bill, let me say that it is good if we can describe what Parliament does in everyday terms, wherever possible. That is, I have to say, more of a challenge with this Bill than it is with most. We are shifting the focus of how we plan and judge Government spending from looking at the cash that we spend each year to looking at what the public get for their money in that year. We are looking not only at the supermarket receipt, but at what is in the shopping trolley.

Cash controls will, of course, remain, but we shall also have proper measures of the resources used up, not just of the money spent. The accounts will be more recognisable to those familiar with private sector accounts; for example, the equivalents of profit and loss, cashflow and a balance sheet. One could say that we are putting the Government's accounts on a more business-like footing.

The Bill delivers four major reforms. First, it introduces resource accounting and budgeting into the Government accounts and modernises the operation of other aspects of the Exchequer and audit Acts. Secondly, it improves the way in which Parliament votes on and scrutinises public spending, with proper measurement of the full economic costs of Government activities, better treatment of capital spending and systematic reporting of the allocation of resources to objectives.

Thirdly, the Bill provides enabling legislation for the preparation and audit of consolidated accounts for the whole public sector. Fourthly, it enables us to set up Partnerships UK, a new body designed to make the public sector a better client in public finance initiative and public-private partnership deals.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I am having difficulty with the Bill. Having spent 11 years on the Public Accounts Committee—I believe that I left the Committee in 1991—I have taken note of a statement by the National Audit Office, which is headed by an Officer of Parliament, the Comptroller and Auditor General. The statement says that, as currently drafted, the Bill threatens to weaken the Comptroller and Auditor General's independence and his relationship to Parliament. I regard that as a major intervention by the National Audit Office.

[Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours]

From what I hear from my hon. Friends, who are all in favour of a shift to resource accounting, they, like me—I have spent the weekend reading papers on the subject—are profoundly concerned about the speed with which the Bill is being introduced, given that there are clear reservations throughout the National Audit Office. The NAO is concerned that Departments are not ready to accept the legislation because they have not fulfilled all the requirements placed on them and on which the Comptroller and Auditor General reported to the Public Accounts Committee. What is happening? If the NAO is resisting, why are we proceeding with the Bill in this way?

Mr. Smith: Obviously, I defer to the experience and knowledge of my hon. Friend and our colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee. They have made an invaluable contribution to the development of the resource accounting and budgeting approach. However, it is important to remember that the whole purpose of the Bill is to place the accounting and budgeting process on a resources basis, not to change the audit arrangements. The aim is broadly to import existing audit arrangements and powers—no more and no less—into the new approach. I am happy to undertake to continue discussion with the Public Accounts Committee and to listen carefully to anything that the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General have to say about the specific points raised by my hon. Friend.

As my hon. Friend will be aware, the development of resource accounting and budgeting has had to pass through certain trigger points, according to which we are on course. Should any Department not be ready at trigger point 3, which is currently being audited by the NAO, it will have to wait a year before it can have audited resource accounts. However, I have no reason to expect that to happen.

Work on this approach to accounting and budgeting has a fairly long, bipartisan history. It began in 1994, under the previous Government, and has been taken up with enthusiasm by the current Government. I hope that our proposals to make the change to resource accounting and budgeting will be welcomed by hon. Members on both sides of the House. The House will be glad to hear that implementation is on schedule and that all Departments are on course to prepare audited resource accounts for the current financial year.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given Ministers' enthusiasm for redesignating Government expenditures as tax credits, will the Chief Secretary confirm that the Bill confers on him and his colleagues unfettered discretion in future to fiddle the figures?

Mr. Smith: Absolutely not. An attack couched in that tone by an Opposition Member is unfortunate in respect of a Bill that has a bipartisan history and gives effect to principles which hon. Members on both sides acknowledge make good sense. The figures produced as we carry out our responsibilities under the Bill will be subject to the normal audit arrangements. The standards to be applied are generally accepted accounting practice and have been informed by the advice of the independent Financial Reporting Advisory Board. That should give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that he seeks. The Bill is not about fiddling the figures, but about putting our accounts on an accruals, rather than a cash, basis. Cash controls currently in operation will remain, and it will be possible to reconcile the accounts to cash control totals. There is no question of fiddling the figures.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Clause 5(2) gives the Treasury the power to direct in respect of accounts, and hon. Members on both sides of the House are concerned about the possibility of that discretionary power being used improperly. Will the right hon. Gentleman consider establishing an independent body to set and determine accounting standards?

Mr. Smith: The Bill confers no direction powers on the Treasury that do not already exist under current legislation; the Bill merely transposes those powers. The powers are subject to all the normal protections and safeguards in the interests of the House, the public and parliamentary scrutiny. The idea that the Treasury will have unfettered discretion is nonsense: if anything, the Bill imposes slightly greater constraints on the Treasury than the existing arrangements.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Given that explanation, why does clause 10(2) state:

"The accounts shall . . . contain such information in such form as the Treasury thinks fit"?

Mr. Smith: Again, the Bill simply transposes and updates existing powers to the accruals format.

The accounts will be scrutinised, undertaken to professional standards and subject to independent oversight. That is accepted not only by Members of Parliament with a knowledge of such matters, but by those who follow such matters closely from outside the House. As I have said, everything in the Bill is in line with generally accepted accounting procedures. That is the basis on which we should proceed. We are mindful of the importance of our accountability to the House and the proper powers of the House over supply.

I shall say more about how resource accounting works.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am sorry to press my right hon. Friend again. He referred to the powers of the House over supply. The National Audit Office has asked that the Bill

"shall not have legislative effect until the Treasury provides the Committee of Public Accounts with appropriate assurances that all Departments are prepared fully for the change and the Committee has signified that it is content."

Is that the Government's position as well? Do the Government intend to listen to the Public Accounts Committee on this matter and not proceed with implementation in all Departments before the PAC has signified that it is content?

Mr. Smith: Yes. As I said earlier, I am ready to discuss these matters with the PAC whenever it sees fit. However, the existing arrangements already provide for the PAC to consider, for example, the Treasury's six-monthly memorandums on progress, and the PAC does so. I would expect the next memorandum, which will appear in January or February of next year, to report to the PAC on

progress in relation to trigger point 3, which is the readiness of the Departments to which my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) refers.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I want to make two points to the Chief Secretary. First, it is disappointing that the trigger-point structure is not implicit in the Bill. It is a Treasury decision rather than anybody else's. Secondly—this is not a synthetic intervention—in August 1999, the National Audit Office was expecting 53 dry-run accounts, but received only 22. The Chief Secretary is right to say that this is an important reform, and it would be a disaster if it got off to a broken start.

Mr. Smith: I acknowledge, as does the right hon. Gentleman—notably in his capacity as Chairman of the PAC—the importance of having a thorough procedure. A thorough procedure is in place and the Government take it extremely seriously, notwithstanding the status of the trigger-point mechanism that he describes. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that while the system is being introduced I shall ensure that the mechanism is adhered to in the interest of proper accountability. The system needs to command the confidence of Parliament as well as the wider public, including people of all political persuasions.

Resource accounting applies accruals accounting techniques to central Government by focusing on resources consumed rather than cash spent. The main change, therefore, is to the treatment of fixed assets. Resource accounting will reflect the costs of consuming fixed assets and of holding them through a charge for depreciation, and the cost of capital, rather than just the cost of acquisition as under a cash-based system of accounts. As I have said, resource accounting is based on generally accepted accounting practice in the United Kingdom. It reflects the accounting and disclosure requirements issued by the Accounting Standards Board and the Companies Acts to the extent that that is appropriate for central Government.

Resource accounting will form the basis of resource budgeting so that we can plan and control central Government expenditure on an accruals basis. Subject to parliamentary approval, supply will be voted on an accruals basis under resource accounting and budgeting, and resource accounts will replace appropriation accounts but will fulfil essentially the same function.

Resource accounting and budgeting applies the private sector's best financial reporting practices to central Government so that, for the first time, we shall produce the equivalent of the main financial statements from commercial accounts. That is, a balance sheet, an operating cost statement, a statement of recognised gains and losses and a cash flow statement.

Of course, resource accounting and budgeting goes even further than that. Under the new system, there will be a summary of resource outturns reflecting parliamentary control and, critically, a statement of resources by departmental aims and objectives under their public service agreements. That will enable us to focus on outcomes, not just on inputs—on the products of our spending, not just the size of our investment. We can thereby ensure that future public spending is planned and controlled prudently.

Throughout the life of the resource accounting and budgeting project, there has been regular contact between the Treasury and Parliament. I referred earlier to some of it. It included the publication, under the previous Government, of a Green Paper in July 1994 and a White Paper in 1995, the submission of memorandums to Parliament, parliamentary hearings and subsequent publication by the Public Accounts Committee and Treasury Joint Committee. The matter was also covered in the Procedure Committee.

All along the way, Parliament has played an important role in the development of this new and important process. I can assure the House that reporting to Parliament will continue throughout the implementation phase. As the availability and relevance of information of interest to Parliament increases, memorandums will be submitted to provide regular updates on policy and implementation.

I am sorry that timing difficulties denied us the opportunity to consult Parliament on the Bill in advance, as we had intended, but last March the Treasury submitted a memorandum to the Public Accounts, Treasury and Procedure Committees, setting out the Government's intentions for the legislation.

Resource accounting and budgeting makes two important improvements to the outdated and outmoded present system of cash-based accounting. First, it will ensure that the full economic cost of the Government's activities is measured properly by including costs such as capital consumption, which are not reflected in cash-based accounts. It will also match the costs to the right time period, providing the Government with a better basis for allocating resources. Secondly, it will bring about improvements in the treatment of capital spending, so that instead of simply identifying the cost in full in the year of acquisition, the cost of capital will be spread over its useful life, which is obviously sensible.

In the longer term, our aim is for resource accounting and budgeting to lead to whole of Government accounts, which are the natural next step. That will enable us to fulfil the commitment given in the code for fiscal stability to produce accounts for the whole public sector on a consolidated basis, if possible.

Mr. Tyrie: Will that basis extend to defence capital spending?

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed, it will.

That will enable us, as I said, to fulfil our commitments under the code for fiscal stability. Moreover, audited whole of Government accounts will improve the information available to support the control and monitoring of fiscal policy. The accounts will also improve accountability to Parliament and provide greater transparency to taxpayers. However, to produce whole of Government accounts fully audited, we will need greater conformity of accounting policies, systems and procedures, and those are major challenges.

The Government have decided to adopt a staged approach. We shall first concentrate on delivering audited accounts covering central Government—Departments, agencies and non-departmental public bodies—and only then will we be in a position to make a final decision to extend coverage. Incidentally, that staged approach is entirely consistent with what was said by the previous Government and with the 1995 White Paper.

[Mr. Smith]

The purpose of the whole of Government accounts clauses in the Bill is to enable the Treasury to prepare as efficiently as possible by adopting relevant best practice consolidation procedures used in the private sector. In particular, we want to maximise the use of electronic communication and data submission.

Mr. Davis: We all accept the importance of whole of Government accounts, and the Chief Secretary has made a good case for that. Can he explain, therefore, why for the whole of Government accounts the National Audit Office will not have absolute access to all the component parts, in the same way as it would in consolidating a company in the private sector?

Mr. Smith: Some of the bodies that are covered by whole of Government accounts have other auditing arrangements, which are set down in statute. Some are covered by the Companies Act 1989 rather than by public audit arrangements. Under the Bill, any payment that is made from the public purse can be scrutinised and followed as it is at present. As I said earlier, in introducing a reform on the scale of the Bill, we must focus on the main objective, which is to shift from cash to resource accounting. The Bill was never intended to overhaul audit arrangements, but I am happy to discuss with the Public Accounts Committee, or anyone who is interested, serious points of interest that arise on auditing.

Mr. David Davis: I shall not labour the point, but I do not want the Chief Secretary inadvertently to mislead the House. He used the phrase, "scrutinised and followed". In the private sector, a major company's auditor who has to audit the whole company is able to go into any component part. However, the National Audit Office cannot follow public money to any destination. I am sure that we shall debate the point in Committee.

Mr. Smith: Yes, I, too, am sure that we shall debate the matter in Committee. However, the Comptroller and Auditor General will certify that a true and fair record of expenditure has been kept. Accounts that have been audited—we have no reason to believe that they have been improperly—under other arrangements will be overseen. I am happy to discuss that further with the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Can the Chief Secretary confirm that the Comptroller and Auditor General will not certify the regularity of the accounts?

Mr. Smith: The Comptroller and Auditor General will certify a true and fair record. That is a step beyond the provisions that were envisaged in a White Paper that the previous Conservative Government published in 1995. The presumption in that White Paper was of a fair basis. We have gone further than that in strengthening the certification ability of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): I am sorry for the constant interruption, but we are considering important matters that we must clarify now, even though we wish to proceed further. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) made the most important point. It is not enough to certify that the money has been spent; we must ascertain how it is spent. In the interest of parliamentary accountability, the Comptroller and Auditor General needs the power to do that. That is crucial, and the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Accounts Commission are unanimous that that must be understood by everyone.

Mr. Smith: I understand the seriousness with which my right hon. Friend and his colleagues express their anxieties. I stress that the Comptroller and Auditor General and the audit architecture will be just as strong on the resource accounting and budgeting basis to which we are moving as under the current system. The Bill was not intended to overhaul public audit arrangements. I want to be open with the House: proper scrutiny is in the interests of the public and Parliament—Government and Opposition—to ensure value for money, to cut out fraud and to make sure that taxpayers' money is spent wisely and properly. We have a common interest in that, regardless of party affiliation or the issue of the moment. If there are serious grounds for reconsidering some of the audit arrangements, I am happy to discuss them. However, they are not—and were never envisaged to be—the major purpose of the Bill.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): This is a genuine inquiry. Following on from the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), can the Chief Secretary explain why the national health service receives special treatment? Why, for example, does clause 12 say that

"the Secretary of State may give directions—

(a) specifying uses of resources which are to be, or not to be, taken into account"?

That does not seem transparent.

Mr. Smith: It is absolutely transparent, and that is why the references to the NHS are in the Bill. The finances of health authorities and primary care groups come within the central Government accounts covered by the Bill, whereas the health trusts—which have their own auditing arrangements—and local authorities and public corporations will come in during stage 2, as we move towards whole of Government accounts. It is entirely appropriate that the existing arrangements for central Government bodies, including health authorities and primary care groups, have been covered in the way that the hon. Gentleman describes—they are in the Bill.

I want to progress to the other important provision of the Bill, which paves the way for the establishment of Partnerships UK. That body is central in our drive to modernise key public services. Partnerships UK will provide greater clarity in the way that the Government do business with the private sector and make available to them the key commercial skills needed to deliver better value for money and effective investment in front-line services. It will be a new public-private partnership that will offer a long-term home to the type of deal-making skills that are presently available to the public sector only temporarily in the Treasury taskforce. It will work in the public interest and address the key weaknesses in the current public-private partnership process so that the public sector becomes a more efficient and effective client.

Over the past two and a half years, the Government have fundamentally reformed the private finance initiative by prioritising projects, ending universal testing, offering a fairer deal to staff and standardising contracts. We have streamlined the PFI and put it on a more sustainable and successful basis and the next step is to use the new PFI to drive forward our programme to modernise public services across the board. That means expanding the PFI, applying it in sectors where it has not been used extensively before and enabling smaller projects to be bundled together so that the PFI is a cost-effective option for carrying them forward. There will be new relationships with the private sector involving local authorities as part of our public-private partnership programme.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Can the Chief Secretary describe precisely what assets the Government expect the PFI to have within its balance sheet when they talk of anticipating one of about £1 billion in due course?

Mr. Smith: I think I know from where the hon. Gentleman is getting his references to the £1 billion and the idea that the PFI will be some sort of £1 billion bank, but I can assure him that it will not be a bank or a deposit-taking body and it certainly will not start at the scale of £1 billion. We see it working essentially as a co-venturing institution that will bring better facility to the public sector so that it can engage the deal-making skills that are necessary for getting successful PFI projects up and running. It will offer an opportunity to bundle together smaller schemes, which might not be viable on their own under the PFI because of overheads, to enable them to proceed.

Through the partnerships that Partnerships UK will assist, I believe that we will better harness the skills and resources of the private sector. Partnerships UK will enable the public sector to form partnerships with the private sector on more equal terms. As a public-private partnership—in the private sector, but operating in the interests of the public sector—it will be able to offer a long-term home to the skill base required to support the public sector in the execution of public-private partnership deals.

The business plan for Partnerships UK is under development. We have consulted widely throughout to ensure that Partnerships UK generates the greatest benefit for all the stakeholders in PFI, public and private alike. It is clear already that those with an interest in PFI and PPPs see an enormous benefit in an initiative that will make the Government a better partner.

The Bill modernises the public sector and transforms the way in which we plan and account for public spending.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend realises that I am making my peroration. I shall happily give way to him.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I want to clarify a few matters. The Government have established many limited companies over the years, such as the Student Loan Company and Remploy. Will the Comptroller and Auditor General have access so as to audit the accounts of such companies, which increasingly carry out the Government's business?

Mr. Smith: As I said, a number of bodies, including those that my hon. Friend mentioned, are covered by provisions on auditing arrangements in the Companies Acts. That has not prevented the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee from investigating them in the past—I believe that there was an inquiry into Remploy. I can but stress that the same powers as are available now will be available to the Comptroller and Auditor General, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee under the new resource accounting and budgeting arrangements.

I realise that members of the Public Accounts Committee, based I am sure on their experience, will have an appetite for revisiting some of this territory and the rules that are presently in operation. I am prepared to discuss that, but it is not the primary purpose of the Bill. I understand why my hon. Friend raised the issue. I think that I have been as forthcoming and sympathetic as I can be in saying that the Government are open to dialogue on this matter.

The Bill will give Parliament and the public, as well as government, more and better information on how we secure quality public services and value for money for all our people. I commend it to the House.

4.52 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Government Resources and Accounts Bill because, although great benefit can be derived from the construction of a proper balance sheet for the public sector and from proper rules for clear, simple and rigorously-defined government accounts, the Bill gives unfettered discretion to the Treasury, establishes no clear principles for the accounting of income or expenditure, will permit the Treasury to continue to omit large public assets and liabilities from the national balance sheet, and hence represents a missed opportunity to make much-needed improvements in the compilation and presentation of government accounts."

I declare an interest—which lies in the Register—relating to clauses 15, 16 and 17, which is not connected to the reasoned amendment and about which I shall say precisely nothing.

The Chief Secretary introduced the debate with the utmost reasonableness, for which we are duly grateful, but I fear that, in so doing, he failed to address some of the major issues. Like the poet Ovid, he may later feel that I began better than I ended, because I want to start with some congratulations, proceed to the identification of some shared problems, move on to lament the inadequacy of the solutions in the Bill and end with an indictment.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): The hon. Gentleman is a good supporter.

Mr. Letwin: Indeed, a good supporter, as the hon. Gentleman says.

First, the congratulations. The Chief Secretary said that the Bill had a noble lineage, and he was absolutely right. The idea of resource accounting was introduced by my

[Mr. Letwin]

right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). Its aim is shared on both sides of the House. The Chief Secretary echoed the somewhat overblown statement of the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), when he said that the Bill had a Gladstonian aspect. It is a splendid aim to give the public sector a proper balance sheet and proper accounts. On that we are at one.

Congratulations are due because people in many Departments have laboured mightily over the past two or three years accumulating a kind of Domesday book of the public sector. That is another fine tradition in the United Kingdom. We must remember that the purpose of the original Domesday book was to maximise the tax take of the then Government. That is something at which the Government have been greatly skilled, so we recognise that they will also have been particularly good at this task. However, in this case the issue is not how much can be taxed, but rather what the taxpayer owns, how it is being used and what is being spent on it. We are agreed that we need better information on that. That need is great: much greater than the Chief Secretary made clear in his remarks.

First, there is the issue of depreciation. There is a massive problem in our public sector: we have never had a proper sense of the resources that we use up, or of the gradual depreciation, or decline, of assets under public sector control. That has obtained on both sides of the House, regardless of which party has been in power. The water industry, under its nationalised aegis, is a classic case. Year after year, Chancellors of the Exchequer in both parties have found it more immediately necessary to spend on social security, or on whatever else has been at the top of the agenda. Consequently, not enough has been spent on investment in the water industry—although billions have now been spent in the private sector—and as a result we have, to this day, an essentially Victorian sewerage system.

There are many other examples. As we all know, much of the public dissatisfaction with our hospitals and schools derives from the fact that for years they, too, were depreciating unnoticed—unnoticed not by their users, of course, but by the Treasury in its discussions with the various Departments. We desperately need a proper set of accounts that properly grasps the depreciation of those public assets. Again, the parties are joined in that desire.

The Chief Secretary said nothing about liability, but I think he will also agree with me—I hope he will—that we are desperately lacking in that regard. We have no proper account of the great and growing liabilities of the public sector in relation to, for example, pensions. I am referring not to the relatively minor, although in itself quite large, problem of the public sector pension schemes which are, to some extent, dealt with in the Bill, but to the public state pension, which represents an enormous and ballooning liability in not just this country but many others. We need clarity in regard to the scope and scale of that liability.

We need to understand far better than we do at present what are the real liabilities that are totted up each time a project is implemented in the private or public-private sector under the private finance initiative, and the public sector establishes a contract that effectively enforces a series of payments over a long period that currently do not appear in the public accounts.

All that is allied to the enormous need for much greater clarity of presentation. I draw the House's attention to three important statements made in an article. First:

"Financial reporting in the public sector is a key element in the accountability of public sector bodies."

I think we would all agree with that. Secondly:

"While it is recognized that financial reports should be readable and intelligible, improved reader understanding is sometimes felt by those who compile them to be a disadvantage."

Thirdly:

"A number of steps can be taken to help the process. For example, the report should . . . minimise jargon . . . Have a logical structure . . . Not be unduly distorted"—

I draw the House's attention to this—

"by public relations considerations".

The importance of those comments lies in the fact that they were made by none other than the current chief adviser to the Chief Secretary on these matters, Professor Likierman—who also said, in a report written with Vass,

"Those who wish to find out what is going on are faced with major hurdles".

That is indeed the set of problems that we face in the presentation of public accounts.

I think—I hope; I trust—that, so far, the Chief Secretary and I are on common ground. Members of the Public Accounts Committee who have already spoken have made it clear that they share many of the concerns that I have mentioned, and it appears that the last Government shared them. We have a substantial problem. The next question is, does the Bill address that problem? It is, I am afraid, abundantly clear that the answer is no: it hardly begins to do so.

I shall begin with assets. We are told in paragraph 46 of the helpful notes on clauses prepared by the Chief Secretary's officials—this mirrors the Chief Secretary's own statements:

"It is likely that the first accounts will only cover the central government sector . . . but that these will be expanded to include all public sector bodies".

The Chief Secretary began by lamenting the difficulty of discussing such matters in terms that ordinary people would understand. Let me try to do it for him. He was trying to tell us that the Bill had nothing to say about the accounting of schools, hospitals or roads—the three largest public sector assets.

Mr. Key: Defence.

Mr. Letwin: As my hon. Friend points out from a sedentary position, there are yet other aspects, but I draw attention to three in my modest way. The Bill leaves out the most important.

Hon. Members might think that, as the Chief Secretary had not done particularly well on assets, he would have done something on the liability side. We search in vain in the resource accounting manual and we search even more in vain in the Bill for any reference to the state pension and its liabilities—there is not one. There is not even the suggestion that in due course, or at a later stage, there will

be any proper accounting of the state's massive liabilities—hundreds of billions of pounds worth—for state pensions.

One might have thought that, as there were going to be clauses about the private finance initiative and the public-private partnerships in the Bill, it would contain something about accounting for the liabilities of the PPP or the PFI. That does not seem an unreasonable request of a so-called resource accounting Bill. Sharing, I trust and hope, the view that something was needed, we might have thought that there would be something in the Bill. There is not—not a word about the liabilities for schools, hospitals or roads that are subject to the PFI.

It is possible that the minuscule, by comparison, number of PFI and PPP projects conducted by central Government Departments will be covered. I say it is possible because my right hon. and hon. Friends and I have asked a series of written questions about the matter. We have received some answers. For the House's edification, I shall read the totality of the text of one of those answers. The Chief Secretary said:

"Any liabilities incurred as a result of such transactions will be accounted for in line with the requirements of Chapter 9 of the Resource Accounting Manual. This states that for all complex transactions, the overriding principles of Financial Reporting Standards (FRS) 5 'Reporting the Substance of Transactions' should be followed.

In particular, an amendment to the version of the Manual published in August 1999, which has been agreed with the Financial Reporting Advisory Board, will make clear that Private Fiance Initiative (PFI) transactions should be accounted for in accordance with the Treasury Taskforce's Technical Note No. 1 (revised) 'How to account for PFI transactions'.

The Technical Note sets out additional practical guidance on the Accounting Standards Board's Application Note (AN) 'Amendment to FRS'"—[*Official Report*, 1 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 49.]

[Interruption.] I am delighted to hear that the House does not want to hear the rest of that fascinating explanation in plain English, which the Chief Secretary recommended to the House, of exactly the answer to the simple question: will PFI contracts for central Government Departments be included or excluded? I do not have the foggiest clue. I doubt that the Minister who signed the answer had the foggiest clue. Certainly, the House will not. It is possible that they are included.

In passing, I should like to mention a noted example of open government. We tried to find out the answer to that question and to others by the simple expedient of trying to talk to the person who actually knows about these things, which, I regret to say, is not ever a Minister in such cases, but his chief adviser. Professor Likierman is one of the world's great experts on public accounting, so one might have thought that one would get an answer from him. I tried to see him. I sent a request and was told that it had been lost. Then I sent a fax request. I was told that it had been received, but that it had to be transported to the Chancellor's private office for reasons that remained obscure. Then I was told that the decision was that I could not see Professor Likierman without a Minister and, unfortunately, no Minister would be available, so I could not see the professor. Therefore, I cannot tell hon. Members whether the answer to the question is yes or no. I am sure that Professor Likierman knows. It would be very nice if, through the Minister at some time, he would tell the House.

I am clear about one thing: when it comes to presentation, there is nothing in the Bill to clarify definitions and to ensure that accounts for the public sector are presented like all private sector accounts have been since about 1300, so that ordinary people can understand them.

The position is much worse than that.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): I am slightly surprised that the hon. Gentleman suggests that private sector accounts have been easily comprehensible for the past 600 years. I do not remember that always being the case, but is he not letting the best be the enemy of the good? He is saying that, because at the moment we do not account for any of those things—capital expenditure, schools, hospitals and roads—no reform of the accounting system should be countenanced; but reform should cover all those things. Does he agree that logically his position would lead to a delay in the revision of the accounting system until such time as all those elements could be introduced? Another year or two might pass before we reach that point.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman, who is a friend of mine, asks a typically acute question, which I shall answer as best I can. As I was not able to ask Professor Likierman, I cannot give an exact reason—but I have a speculation. I think I know why it is that schools, hospitals and roads, which are usually the first items that one would start with, have been excepted. It is because "Yes Minister" is often less of a parody than a reality.

I think that what happened, roughly speaking, is that a Minister—probably my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe—said, "We ought to have some resource accounts". Subsequently, many permanent secretaries went into a huddle and said, "This is a most frightful thing that is hitting us—we shall for the first time have to put everything down. What can we do? We must find the smallest items—those that will cause the most technical difficulty, but reveal the least—and begin with those. Indeed, we must begin with those items that do not guarantee that we will ever have to move beyond them. We must remember to include such words as 'it is likely that', and assure the House that 'in due course', 'perhaps', 'maybe', 'if', 'sometime', 'never' we shall get to it. Meanwhile, we will have the most enormous resource accounting manual. We will also be able to give the Minister a Bill"—which I shall deal with shortly, as it will make the Chief Secretary one of the most powerful people in the whole world—"so that he will be very, very happy with us. We will get our knighthoods early while having succeeded in not writing down anything that matters two hoots."

I grant the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Mr. Palmer) that company accounts are an imperfect mechanism—as those of us who have been dealing with them for many years in the private sector know all too well—but they have the great advantage of regularity—a term to which I shall return momentarily—and the advantage of relative simplicity. The combination of those two advantages means that people who are skilled with such accounts and the notes accompanying them, because they are composed under standards of accounting practice, have at least a chance of doing the detective work to find out what is really happening. I fear that because the Bill contains no such provisions in the public sector, no such ability will pertain to the public sector. That is my biggest complaint.

[Mr. Letwin]

As some of my hon. Friends have already started to explain, the situation is really very bad in one respect. What does clause 5(2) do? Does it say something about establishing an independent watchdog to ensure that there are proper definitions? No, it says:

"Resource accounts shall be prepared in accordance with directions issued by the Treasury."

Clause 5(3) states:

"The Treasury shall exercise the power to issue directions under subsection (2) . . . subject to such adaptations as are necessary in the context of departmental accounts"—

which I think should read "as are judged necessary by the Treasury", and "subject to such adaptations as the Treasury chooses".

In clause 7, we might expect to see mention of an independent body, but not a bit of it. Subsection (1) states:

"The Treasury may direct a government department to prepare for each financial year accounts in relation to any specified matter".

Subsection (2) tells us:

"Accounts under subsection (1) shall be prepared in accordance with directions issued by"—

you guessed it—

"the Treasury."

When we come to the whole of government accounts, in clause 10(2), we are told:

"The accounts shall—

(a) contain such information in such form as the Treasury thinks fit, and

(b) be designed to conform to generally accepted accounting practice subject to—

our old friend—

"such adaptations as are necessary",

as determined by the Treasury.

I think that we are able to describe the Bill and its provisions on who will define terms and the rules of the game as a Bill that allows the Treasury to do exactly what it chooses. Quite a good first clause in the Bill would be one that said, "Under this Bill, the Treasury may do anything it likes." That is why I said that the Chief Secretary will be a very powerful person.

Mr. Edward Davey: I have much sympathy for the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. However, will he tell us where in the previous Government's White Paper, "Better Accounting for the Taxpayer's Money", they proposed an independent body to determine public sector accounting standards?

Mr. Letwin: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question, but am unable to answer it. However, in about two or three minutes, I shall be making an announcement showing that, unlike the current Government—the Liberal Democrats have never had the chance to be in government—some of us learn from our mistakes. Although Liberal Democrat Members never—I have checked the record—mentioned the point at the time, I am grateful for converts at any time. As I shall explain shortly, Conservative Members have been converted on the issue.

The problem is deeper in two senses—only one of which has been dealt with by the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours); by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the current Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee; and by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), the former Committee Chairman.

In clause 11, there is the first glimmer of an independent body. It states:

"The Treasury shall send accounts under section 10 to the Comptroller and Auditor General."

Nobody doubts the independence of the Comptroller and Auditor General, nor his competence. The problem is that the clause goes on to say that the Comptroller and Auditor General

"shall examine accounts sent to him under this section with a view to satisfying himself that they present a true and fair view."

That language has been constructed precisely to limit the scope of his inquiries—with all the impediments that were described as to how he conducts them—to the question of whether something has been taken, stolen or misappropriated.

We are blessed that British government, under any Administration, is, on the whole, honest. The Comptroller and Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee do good work but, on the whole, they do not have to work very hard because, on the whole, our Administration is honest. Thank goodness for that. The proposal continues that fine tradition—there is no complaint about that—but also prevents the Comptroller and Auditor General from doing more.

We do not have to look far for the truth of that assertion. In the notes on clauses—which are remarkably open and splendid—we are told:

"Due to the nature of the accounts . . . there is no requirement for the C and AG to provide an audit opinion concerning the regularity of the accounts but simply to determine whether, in his opinion, they are true and fair."

We are dealing here with a clear case. The Bill sets up the Treasury—because the Treasury designed the Bill—as the body which will decide on the definitions, on how accounts are prepared and presented and on whether, in the words of Professor Likierman, they do or do not contain an undue proportion of public relations about them. All these things are to be left to the Treasury. Yes, there is proper regard to whether money has been stolen or misappropriated, but none to having an independent body verify whether the presentation of the accounts is comprehensible, clear or designed to provide a misleading opinion.

Mr. Edward Davey: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee and the Select Committee on the Treasury prefer the Government to go for the true and fair opinion basis, rather than the proprietary and regulatory basis that the Conservative party has proposed?

Mr. Letwin: If the body was independent and was setting up standards of accounting practice, I would entirely accept the proposition that true and fair would be the right measure. Alas, there is no such body and no such set of definitions.

That leads me to the indictment. This Bill—not so surprisingly from the Government—is a triumph of presentation over substance. The Government are saying one thing and doing another. The Bill is an empty box. The most important assets and liabilities are missing; there is total discretion for the Treasury; and there is no independent check on definition or presentation. It is not a resource accounting Bill in anything but name; it is a creative accounting Bill, from a Chancellor who has proved himself to be the most brilliant creative accountant in British political history. *[Interruption.]* I thought that that was a compliment and I am surprised that the Chief Secretary rejects it. That compliment has been paid to the Chancellor by many external observers, and will continue to be paid as long as he continues on his course.

To be constructive, I shall make a promise. We are binding ourselves once and for all—because we have learned from our mistakes—to a clear, complete and comprehensible set of public accounts. That is democratically proper, and a matter of common sense. We have announced today that we have asked Sir Bryan Carsberg—the chairman of the International Accounting Standards Committee, and one of Britain's most distinguished accountants—to head a new shadow accounts commission. It will remedy the defects in the Bill by setting out standards of national accounting practice, clear definitions and clear systems of presentation which mirror the statements of standard accounting practice in the private sector, so that no future Chancellor—Labour or Conservative—will ever have the opportunity to mispresent the accounts and mislead the public again. I believe that that is one of the great advances in the conceptualisation of fair and accountable government in this country.

I will make an offer, beyond that promise, to the Chief Secretary—come with us. Take our shadow accounts commission with its chairman intact and we can set it up as an independent body with cross-party consensus. Then we can take this lamentable empty box of a Bill and turn it into an Act that we can all be proud of and that gives us genuine resource accounts for the whole Government.

5.15 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) drew attention to clause 11(2) on the restrictions on the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General, and I shall deal with that point, but my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary was right to introduce the Bill because it is an important measure that has been acclaimed by the Public Accounts Committee and various Select Committees.

Much of my time as Chairman of the Liaison Committee has been spent trying to get Select Committees to examine the expenditure for which they have some responsibility. They have not been able to do it because, frankly, the accounts are impenetrable to the ordinary person. My right hon. Friend is to be congratulated on trying to open up this important area.

The Public Accounts Committee is very much in the shadow of Gladstone. For 14 years, I faced the one word over the door of Room 6A, which the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) now has the privilege of using: in lettering that is very difficult to decipher, because it was devised by Pugin, it says "Assiduity". That is the Committee's and Parliament's task in examining the accounts.

For 23 years—14 as Chairman—I have been a member of the Public Accounts Committee, whose origins go back to the Exchequer and Audit Departments Acts of 1866 and 1921. I took some part in the National Audit Act 1983, which arose from Norman St. John-Stevas's Private Member's Bill, predicated on the understanding that he wanted to be able to follow public money wherever it went.

The idea came from John Garrett, the Member for Norwich, South from 1974 to 1983 and from 1987 to 1992. I worked with him closely on the Fulton committee on the civil service; he was a management consultant and I was a member of the committee. Norman St. John-Stevas called him the grandfather of the Bill, which looked back to what Gladstone had in mind and to all that he was able to achieve because of the enormous power and influence that he had.

What was Gladstone's vision? He set up a Public Accounts Committee, chaired by a member of the Opposition, who was to examine the details—not just the broad area—of all Departments' spending. Rarely or never could that power have been given to an Opposition Member under subsequent Administrations. To commit an Opposition Chairman to examining such spending details would have been unthinkable.

Gladstone's intention was followed up by the 1866 Act. The intentions of that Act are very relevant today, because we live in that shadow and we are trying to retain the kind of parliamentary accountability that was devised by Gladstone and led to the very high standards of public service that we have come to regard as normal. That is what happened then and is still happening.

What the 1866 Act achieved was begun by the report of the Select Committee on Public Moneys in 1857. There was a huge step forward with the establishment of the Committee of Public Accounts in 1861 and the passing of the 1866 Act, which established the post of Comptroller and Auditor General.

The key driving principle was the belief that the audit of all the money spent by central Government Departments should be done on behalf of Parliament, and from 1866, that was to be done by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The long title of the 1866 Act noted that its purpose was

"to regulate the Receipt, Custody, and Issue of Public Moneys and to provide for the audit thereof".

In 1866, the idea was to bring Government spending—public moneys—under the scrutiny of Parliament, at a time when central government was virtually the only vehicle for public spending. In 1999, when we have a plethora of public service providers, it cannot be argued that public moneys are properly accountable for to Parliament in the way that they were for so long.

It was necessary for the Comptroller and Auditor General to have access to Departments. When the Public Accounts Committee considered the Exchequer and all the Departments back in 1866, the issue of what constituted public moneys was a matter of concern to several members of that Committee, and they were assured that all aspects of revenue and expenditure were covered. That is not the case today. The Select Committee, in the report that led to the changes made in 1866, said:

"Your Committee feel assured that whatever new securities may be devised for the faithful appropriation of the public money, they will be incomplete unless they are accompanied by a system of public accounts founded on the principles they have suggested".

[Mr. Robert Sheldon]

That has manifestly not been the case.

Many new securities have been devised for spending public moneys, but those have not been matched by a commensurate extension of the rights of Parliament properly to scrutinise that expenditure. That is the difference that we have seen over the years. Gladstone's achievements have been whittled away, as was exposed by John Garrett in a massive amount of research, for which proper tribute should be paid to him. It provided the background for Norman St. John-Stevas's National Audit Office Act 1983. Because of that research, he was fully aware of what had happened over the years, and he wanted to replace that with the original intention.

I was a member of the Standing Committee that scrutinised the 1983 Act. Leon Brittan was the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and I was the shadow Chief Secretary. In spring 1983, Leon Brittan introduced in Committee several new clauses and deleted others. With a general election imminent, we reluctantly agreed to those amendments. Before the Bill's consideration had been completed, the general election was called. On the last day of that Parliament, when nearly all the outstanding legislation was lost, my role was to go round the Chamber to inform my parliamentary colleagues on the Opposition Benches not to shout, "Object." I told them that the legislation was important, because we must try to regain parliamentary accountability. Even my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) kept silent on that occasion.

The National Audit Office Act 1983 did not achieve all that we wanted, and we hoped for subsequent renewal of the original intentions. As so often happens, what was temporary became permanent and stayed in place for 16 years. Meanwhile, I became Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, which was what I wanted, as I wished to see the new Act implemented and the position of the National Audit Office established.

During my 15 years in that post, I tried to pursue the need for greater powers of investigation for the National Audit Office. One occasion on which I received some encouragement was the meeting in October 1994 with the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who was then Chancellor of the Exchequer. With Sir Peter Hordern, the then Member of Parliament for Horsham and Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, I pointed out that the National Audit Office did not have the same statutory rights of access as did the European Court of Auditors or the Audit Commission. That is unacceptable. I pointed out to the then Chancellor that I understood the Government's reluctance to concede such rights in the 1983 Act, given the extensive new powers being brought in. However, the standing of the National Audit Office, and the way in which it carries out its work, is an important aspect of the case for extending its powers to something like their original scope, before the Treasury whittled them away over 16 years.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe on that occasion said that he recognised many of the arguments for increased access. He accepted that the issues needed to be re-examined. The discussion was very useful, and some improvements were made. However, although I wanted all non-departmental public bodies to be audited by the National Audit Office, only half of them are so audited.

In that regard, I must pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. This Government have ensured that all 15 of the new non-departmental bodies are audited by the National Audit Office. That does not mean that private sector auditors are not included in the process, as the NAO makes use of them all the time. The private sector is very valuable, and work is given to accountancy firms with the appropriate expertise. That provides a useful exchange of views about how such matter should be audited.

Mr. David Davis: The right hon. Gentleman said that all 15 new non-departmental bodies have been opened up to the National Audit Office. Given that the Legal Services Commission and the body that looks after the royal palaces have also been opened up to the NAO, the Government have a very good record in that respect.

Mr. Sheldon: I pay tribute in turn to the right hon. Gentleman, who is a successor of mine as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. I am pleased that he is present today, and I look forward to many more reports from him in the years to come.

Even when accounts are audited by the private sector, responsibility lies with the National Audit Office. Let me refer now to what the Bill contains, and what it omits.

The Bill makes no provision for the Comptroller and Auditor General to be the auditor of all Executive non-departmental public bodies. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary for what the Bill covers, but it does not cover what is now called the register of social landlords. It does not cover either the Housing Corporation, the Environment Agency, student loans, or Remploy.

Although I accept that the NAO can ask for the accounts of those bodies, I had to use a bit of muscle to make sure that it could inspect the accounts of the register of social landlords, as there seemed to be some reluctance about that. Auditors should not have to plead for access. When it comes to the auditing of public money, access ought to be a right.

The Bill does not make provision for the Comptroller and Auditor General to be appointed the auditor of limited companies established by central Government. It makes no provision for the Comptroller and Auditor General to have any access at all to Partnerships UK. I have some nice things to say about Partnerships UK, but I do not like the fact that there is no provision for access to its accounts, even though it will receive public sector funds and will advise on even larger amounts of public expenditure. Clearly, that cannot be right. I hope that that is an oversight that will be corrected in Committee.

Dr. Palmer: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, where a public body such as a local authority is being audited—in that case it would be by the Audit Commission—it would be unreasonably onerous to expect it to be audited twice? If all public bodies of any type were to be brought under the Comptroller and Auditor General, which I understand to be my right hon. Friend's recommendation, would not the legislation governing the audits for all those bodies have to be amended?

Mr. Sheldon: The NAO should have access. It has access in certain circumstances at present, but we want to ensure that it is regularised. The NAO should not have to plead for it, but should be able to gain access as of right.

The Bill makes no provision for the NAO to have access to bodies whose accounts are going to be consolidated into WGA—whole of Government accounts. Instead, it offers the inadequate alternative of access to the auditors of such bodies.

It is important that the National Audit Office should have access to all bodies, but also that it is able to audit them. It is not enough for auditors simply to have access, because they must then have knowledge that something is wrong or have some other reason for inquiry. There should be a basic right of access. All sorts of important matters have emerged only because of audit. For example, in the Metropolitan police, the person responsible for paying money for secret matters was living like a lord in Scotland, having taken £5 million. He used to return from his weekends there because he had the power to authorise expenditure and to sign cheques under a provision of secrecy. That matter would not have come out without audit. Only when audit occurs do we discover what has happened.

The Public Accounts Committee and the Public Accounts Commission strongly and unanimously want the changes that I have outlined. What those who drafted the Bill saw as a mainly technical measure did not allow for the important aspects that I have detailed. We are concerned with the accountability of the Executive to Parliament on the most important matters that concern both. I recall a meeting in the Treasury with Denis Healey during which I had occasion to remind him that I was a Minister second and a Member of Parliament first. That is the proper order of priority.

Let me now refer to the rest of the Bill. The important part relates to work on getting the private finance initiative into better shape, and a new body is being formed. The intention is to make the public sector a more intelligent procurer of PFI projects. Like the taskforce, the new body will advise public sector procurers to help to develop projects to the point at which they can be put to market, and it will help them to choose the best advisers for the project.

I am in favour of the PFI, but we must be rigorous about the conditions. If the private sector is more efficient in certain areas than the public sector is, that is splendid, and we should ask that sector's advice and have the work undertaken by it. The private sector can overcome the cost of capital, and the public service can have capital at a lower level. The private sector must mount a not unreasonable hurdle, but if it can be more efficient, by all means let us allow it to be so.

The private sector must also accept risk. Our main tasks are to ensure that it has the right expertise, and that it accepts risk. I see considerable merit in Partnerships UK. To ensure that all that I have said will happen, the Comptroller and Auditor General must have full access to PUK.

I am delighted about resource accounting in more general terms. It is difficult to understand what the estimates and the appropriation accounts really mean. The headings would put anyone off. As the Chairman of the PAC knows, he must go through the papers and must sign them off, but it is difficult to know exactly where the money is going in the detailed programmes. What he must ensure is regularity. We have long taken regularity for granted, but we must not underestimate it. One of my favourite quotations is that cash is certain while everything else is guesswork. There is something in that, but certainty is not enough. We must know how procedures operate.

We must not go over to resource accounting while losing the advantage of cash accounting during the changeover period. We could fall between two stools in moving from cash accounting to resource accounting. I want parallel operation. Those who work in the area dislike parallel operation because they believe that the work is done twice. But we have seen the consequences of that idea in computerisation projects when the old system has been destroyed but the new system has not worked. Hundreds of millions of pounds have been lost. I always used to ask people whether they had not thought of parallel operation for a reasonable time. They always said yes, but that they were sure that they had got the new system right. I want to ensure that they get it right in this case too.

The Bill gives us the opportunity to correct what John Garrett described as the hijacking of the Exchequer and audit Departments; it will assert the rights of Parliament that Gladstone intended, which which need to be restored. The full implications of what I have outlined have not been adequately appreciated, and I certainly expect that my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary, with his concern for the duties of his office and for the rights of Parliament, will accept certain amendments in due course.

5.35 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I confess to having some sympathy with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who took up his job not six weeks ago and received the beautifully wrapped parcel of this Bill, only to hear an ominous ticking from inside it. Let us hope that we can turn it into an alarm clock.

As the Chief Secretary implied, the Bill goes right to the heart of the relationship between Government and Parliament. It is seen by some people as a technical measure, but it is a constitutional measure because it is primarily about that relationship between Parliament and Whitehall and the way in which Parliament allows the Government the money that they need to run the country. It is as simple as that.

Sound and proper finance in the UK is underpinned by the virtuous circle of accountability that has already been referred to by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), my predecessor as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, and the Bill affects every aspect of that circle. The virtuous circle, outlined by Gladstone, involved, first, the system of supply by Parliament; secondly, proper accounting by Government; thirdly, audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General; and, finally, scrutiny by the Public Accounts Committee on behalf of the House of Commons—with, of course, some estimates votes along the way.

The Bill affects all stages of that cycle, so it is of fundamental importance to the powers and responsibilities of Parliament in general and of the PAC in particular. Despite the measure's critical importance to our work, the PAC was not properly consulted on the draft Bill; the whole Committee is concerned about the content. We were promised a draft Bill in March, but it never arrived. The National Audit Office was given only three weeks between receipt of the draft Bill and publication. That does not represent proper consultation by any stretch of

[Mr. David Davis]

the imagination. To give the House some insight into how short that period was, the original memorandum seen by the PAC in March contained no proposals about the CAG's access rights, whereas the Bill repeals section 28 of the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866 and substitutes an inadequate access provision.

The memorandum contained nothing about WGA—the whole of Government accounts. It contained nothing on Partnerships UK. It stated that section 26 of the 1866 Act might need to be amended, whereas the Bill repeals that section without replacing it. That section requires Departments to explain any excess of expenditure beyond the original estimate—a rather important component of the Act. The memorandum specified an intention to retain the statutory appropriation accounts timetable for resource accounts, whereas the Bill allows the Treasury to change the timetable by statutory instrument, subject only to annulment by either House.

Those are serious shortfalls in the consultation process. I happily accept that some were caused by problems with the parliamentary draftsmen—I am sure that the Government have hit the timetable problem that occurs every year. None the less, the procedure was inadequate. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) referred to the comedy programme "Yes, Minister". My hon. Friend might think that the programme is a comedy, but, after three years as Chairman of the PAC, I know that it is a training film.

The Bill meddles with the existing legislation governing financial accountability—a process that dates from the Exchequer and Audit Departments Acts of 1866 and 1921. It may not have been intended that the Bill should meddle in those procedures—in effect, the Chief Secretary said that—but it does. Perhaps the absence of intent explains the inadequacy of the new wording. For example, the Bill does not modernise the audit process to reflect changes in the delivery of public services. That was the thrust of the speech made by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne; I shall return to his comments.

The Bill locks into place weaknesses in accountability that have grown up in the past century or so, and it does nothing to put them right. The public sector financial environment has changed almost beyond recognition since the passage of the first Exchequer and Audit Departments Act in 1866, yet legislation providing a foundation for the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General in examining accounts remains—even in this Bill—largely as framed 130 years ago.

As the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said, the Bill provides an historic opportunity to remove obstacles that have hampered the House's ability to scrutinise the work of government. Legislation passed in 1866 appointed a Comptroller and Auditor General to audit all Departments, including automatically any new Departments created. That was clearly intended to cover every piece of Government expenditure. Since then, government has undergone massive reorganisation, putting large amounts of expenditure outside the departmental boundary. It is a dangerous anomaly that those managerial changes should have arbitrarily removed from automatic parliamentary scrutiny a large amount of expenditure. The Bill should correct that.

I hope that the Government and the House will seize the chance, which is unlikely to return for many decades, to provide a legislative environment that will nurture and foster the highest standards of openness and transparency. The Chief Secretary said—I think in all candour and honesty—that he wanted to make the best of the Bill and to take on board as best he could the proposals and wishes of the Public Accounts Committee. When I referred to the original memorandum, I hope that I pointed out how many aspects of the Bill were unexpected or not as the Committee expected them to be. The Chief Secretary has a major task before him, but I will do my best to facilitate it. However, I shall do that with the single intention of enhancing the effectiveness of Parliament so that it returns to Gladstone's intention and does not apply the letter of the 1866 Act as it is today.

Mr. Letwin: As one would expect, my right hon. Friend is making an interesting speech. Does he agree that it is essential not only that the Comptroller and Auditor General should have the audit powers to which he referred, but that either the CAG or an independent body, such as that which is being set up in shadow, should establish clear rules on definition and presentation, so that hon. Members and the public are able to understand the accounts presented to them?

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, although I shall not major on it in my remarks. There is a serious risk that the information that the Government and the House put into the public domain could be undermined if it is not properly treated on an agreed basis. That could be done either by the Comptroller and Auditor General or by an independent person, such as an independent director of national statistics, who would be appointed in the same way as the CAG. One or other approach would benefit the Government as much as anyone else; I do not make a partisan point.

My remarks follow closely those of my predecessor as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne. I make no apology for that, because we are making not party but parliamentary points, which are largely accepted by the Public Accounts Commission and the Public Accounts Committee. The proposal in the Bill to change the basis for supply and the way that Departments are held accountable to Parliament should not be brought into force until it is clear that the new system is better than the one that it is intended to replace. I have already pointed out to the Chief Secretary that the new system is not yet very close to demonstrating that it can do that. Therefore, I seek an undertaking from the Government—I think that I have already got it, but I hope that it will be confirmed when the Economic Secretary winds up—that the relevant clauses will not be implemented until the Public Accounts Committee has signified its satisfaction and that the Government have provided it with assurances that all Departments are fully prepared for the change.

The Bill must preserve in existing statute the protections that allow the Government to spend only what Parliament authorises and that bring to the House's attention any excess or improper expenditure. That is an essential minimum requirement. We want to move forwards, and, in giving discretion in those matters to the Treasury, the Bill seems to move backwards. That is quite improper, because Parliament is the final arbiter in those matters.

The Bill must provide the Comptroller and Auditor General with access arrangements that mirror those of the Government. He should therefore automatically have access to third parties contracting with public bodies and organisations carrying out public functions authorised by the Government or Parliament.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The right hon. Gentleman is the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, which could take evidence on the Bill. He could bring in civil servants, including Treasury officials, and question them on the Bill's implications. Am I correct in recalling that a Treasury official is always in residence in the Committee, representing the seat taken by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and advising the Committee? If the right hon. Gentleman can take evidence, why does he not do so? We could all attend the sittings to hear the interesting explanations that the Treasury would have to give to justify the way in which the Bill has been framed.

Mr. Davis: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is trying to tempt me or intimidate the officials in the box, but that point will be put to my Committee, and if the members so choose, that is what we shall do.

I return to the point about outside bodies doing the Government's bidding. I am not seeking a licence for the Comptroller and Auditor General to go on fishing expeditions; I simply want him to be able to verify proper use of public money and proper delivery of public services. That seems to me to be a straightforward point.

I remind the House that private finance initiative expenditure, for example, is expected to amount to some £70 billion over the next 25 years. We are not talking about small beer. Another example that comes to mind is the computer centres that handle £4 billion a year of civil servants' wages. There are serious potential problems in those areas, and the CAG should therefore have access.

At the moment Departments regularly secure greater access for themselves than they do for the Comptroller and Auditor General, which seems to be completely the wrong way round. That is not acceptable.

The Bill must also ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General is automatically the auditor of every non-departmental public body. The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne made that point clearly. He said also, as I think I told him in the first place, that the Government have appointed the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit every one of the 15 executive NDPBs that they have created and placed the Legal Services Commission, which was the Legal Aid Board, under the NAO's purview. The Government have made sensible, worthwhile and laudable decisions, but I am saying—as is everybody who has knowledge of these matters—that the process should be regularised and systematic.

The Bill must also enable the CAG to audit limited companies established by central Government Departments. One of the arguments put to us is that it is difficult to do that under European law because a European directive prevents it. If that is the case, I should be interested to hear the Economic Secretary, when she winds up, explain why Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden all have CAGs who can do just that. Presumably, they face the same problems.

Members of the House may be surprised to learn that more than 200 such companies—the Student Loans Company and Remploy have been mentioned—receive between £2 billion and £3 billion of public funding every year. The Minister pointed out that there had been a study on Remploy, and he is perfectly correct—the NAO did a study on Remploy. *[Interruption.]* However, as a voice from across the Floor is prompting me to point out, that was a value-for-money study, which does not meet the same requirement and does not enable the NAO to check for regularity and propriety. It does not involve the NAO's intelligence-gathering function, which sees what is happening and can start studies that are to the benefit of Parliament as a whole.

Existing legislation does not permit the CAG to audit companies, which is another dangerous anomaly, but not one for which I will ever again accept the argument about the European directive.

Most worrying is the fact that those drafting failures leave quangos and publicly owned limited companies as voluntary loopholes in the access rights of Parliament, to be exercised at the whim of the spiritual equivalent of Sir Humphrey Appleby in Whitehall. Civil servants will make the decisions—no doubt, Ministers will ratify them—effectively to have auditors appointed by the Minister and reporting to the Minister. That voluntary exemption from parliamentary scrutiny should not be allowed.

If whole of Government accounts are to be introduced, the Bill should provide properly for the Comptroller and Auditor General to have access, similar to that contained in companies legislation, to bodies whose accounts are consolidated into the wider whole of Government accounts. That requirement amounts to a matching of that which happens in the private sector. If an auditor audits a large company and is required to give a view on the accounts of that company, no matter that another auditor may audit a subsidiary, the auditor who audits the total is allowed to go in an check for himself. The hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) said that we do not want double auditing. Of course we do not, but what I describe is a rare occurrence. The fact that the central auditor has that right acts as a check and a deterrent on the operation of the subsidiary auditor.

Dr. Palmer: To assist the House, will the right hon. Gentleman give a concrete example of the sort of inquiry which he would like the Comptroller and Auditor General to be able to carry out, but which the Comptroller and Auditor General cannot carry out under clause 11(5), under which he can require

"such information and explanations as he may reasonably require"?

Mr. Davis: From time to time, the Comptroller and Auditor General should carry out a statistical investigation. The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne said that sometimes, unless one goes inside a subsidiary body, one cannot know precisely what it is. Much of the value-for-money work carried out by the National Audit Office arises in the first instance from the understanding arrived at by taking a direct look. That understanding cannot be obtained at one remove. It would be difficult for the Comptroller and Auditor General to give an unqualified view of the whole of Government accounts unless he was able to do that. The existence of the deterrent effect would, in any event, give him extra confidence.

Mr. Tyrie: To reinforce my right hon. Friend's point, the subsection to which the hon. Member for Broxtowe

[Mr. Tyrie]

(Dr. Palmer) referred makes it clear that the Comptroller and Auditor General's access is limited to the work of other auditors.

Mr. Davis: I had assumed that everyone knew that, but perhaps not everyone has read the Bill as many times as I have.

The Bill is designed to facilitate public-private partnerships. I approve of that: like the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, I think that public-private partnerships offer the Government a good way forward. However, substantial sums will be involved—as I said, £70 billion over 25 years—and it is certain that any body receiving such funds will advise on even larger amounts of expenditure by other public sector bodies. Therefore, it is essential that the Bill gives the Comptroller and Auditor General full access to any body funded with public money to improve the delivery of public-private partnerships.

The Chief Secretary told my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) that the partnership is not a bank, but a co-sponsoring arrangement, involving far less than the £1 billion that my hon. Friend suggested. However, the leverage of that money is enormous. The effectiveness of the use of public money is enormously important to the public and to the Government, so the National Audit Office and Comptroller and Auditor General should have access. They have access to the current equivalent, so it would be a backward move if the Bill were passed as drafted.

It is extremely important that the Bill should include provision for the Comptroller and Auditor General to validate the Government's performance measures. The resource accounting reforms are important in terms of reforms to the cost base assessment of the capital base, and all the other measures that the outside world would regard as purely technical. However, the real revolution that they offer—one that will occur in the first part of the next century—lies in the attempt to measure the output of government, as well as its cost. That offers the possibility of massive improvements in public service over time.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) once commented that he could not believe how little there was in the way of management accounts and management information in government. These reforms are the first base for the management information that will allow Ministers to make better decisions, and they will allow the public to understand those decisions—to understand what they are supposed to be getting and what they are getting. It is vital that that information is completely trustworthy and beyond criticism. The only way in which the information can be seen to conform to a gold standard or, in a phrase the Chancellor might prefer, a golden rule, is by the National Audit Office or some other body being the arbiter of its veracity—being the auditor, or the check of last resort.

In the past few years, under the current Government and previous Governments, we have had arguments about all sorts of policies and measures. I recall employment statistics being the subject of several such arguments. That sort of thing is corrosive of the way in which resource accounting is supposed to work. My view is shared by the Treasury Committee and reflected in the Government's approach to the best value initiative. The Government are rightly spending millions of pounds on enabling the Audit Commission to verify the performance measures in local government. National Audit Office validation would strongly reinforce both public acceptance and the effectiveness of the performance measures.

Mr. Letwin: My right hon. Friend is making an important point. Is he seconding the Treasury Committee's conclusion that

"it will be crucial that the Head of National Statistics or of any statistical commission decides which statistics are included within the scope of National Statistics rather than Ministers"?

Mr. Davis: In the last minute of my speech, my hon. Friend raises a crucial point. To answer him, I am 80 per cent. seconding it, but let me draw the dividing line.

It strikes me as perfectly reasonable for the Government broadly to make a public decision on performance measures. After all, that is what manifestos are about. That is a decision proper to Ministers, not one that can be made by some independent body. However, the Minister having decided the measure, it is vital that those who validate it are entirely independent. The National Audit Office in respect of public service agreements and the director of national statistics, or his equivalent, should be equally independent.

All that would add up to a truly Gladstonian measure. The Chief Secretary said that the Bill was one of the biggest reforms since Gladstone. If the Government want to be remembered in 100 years as having passed a measure of Gladstonian impact, one of the key tests will be whether they had the courage to say, "Certain matters will be decided by someone other than ourselves." That would be a brave, but correct, decision and it would be in the public interest to make it.

I regard mine as non-partisan, parliamentary points. I doubt that any member of the PAC would disagree with a word that I have said—I am sure that they will say so later if that is not the case. I understand that, although not long, the Bill is technically complex and that the Economic Secretary will not be able to give me answers today. However, I want an undertaking that the Government will take these points on board and try to incorporate them in the Bill. In so doing, they would make their own reform—which is perhaps one of the most worthwhile reforms in the Treasury's approach in recent years—more than merely worth while; they would make it historic.

5.59 pm

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): I speak as a member of the Public Accounts Committee and also as someone who is on the Public Accounts Commission, but I do not speak because of those facts. I speak because, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who is chairman of the commission, I have spent more than 35 years in the House, 22 of them on the Labour Front Bench and too many of them in opposition. I spent nine enjoyable years in government.

It is becoming increasingly clear to me—I say this to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer), who has been intervening with points that have the fascinating ring of Whitehall concerns—that the longer I spend in the House the more convinced I am that the rights and powers of this place must be protected and must remain supreme.

I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that twice you have had to endure a hobbyhorse of mine during the past three weeks, but it is a reality that living and working as we do within a representative democracy, we live in a token democracy unless there is continuous parliamentary scrutiny of the Executive. We become so used to working within the machine that we fail to see the entire picture. However, without scrutiny we will have tokenism and Executive government. That is why I am speaking in the debate. I am desperately concerned that we may be enshrining certain losses of powers in legislation, which I know my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury would not wish to see happen over the years. I also feel that we are missing an opportunity to make two strides forward in our accounting procedure.

Every member of the PAC supports resource accounting in the areas where the Government are trying to advance it in the Bill. However, we are more concerned that we should restore what Gladstone thought he had given to the House in 1866—the power of the House to examine and scrutinise all public money for probity, for waste and for accuracy. We on the PAC can only scratch the surface, examining 50 accounts and issues a year.

The role of the House in scrutinising the Executive is meaningful only while the National Audit Office has the fullest possible access to Government expenditure in all its forms. Back in 1866, it was simple. It was easy to ensure that all cash trails were followed. None of us on the PAC is opposed to structural changes in government. When we talk about such changes we are talking about the effect that they will have on the House, and the need, therefore, to adapt the powers of the House and those of the NAO to match them.

As my right hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, have intimated, over the years, changes have taken place but the powers of the PAC and the NAO have not altered accordingly. We find that we have eroded the democratic duty of the House to scrutinise the Executive, especially on the financial front. It is not only the growing sums of money that are moving outside the net of NAO scrutiny with the altering of the structure of government, with agencies and so on. It is not only the volume but the percentage. There is a progressive decline in the proportion of scrutiny which remains with the House. I say to my right hon. Friend, as did the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, that we are delighted that each of the small Executive non-departmental public bodies set up under the Government has been subjected to full NAO scrutiny. Unfortunately, that has not been the case in many other instances.

We find that £3 billion that previously would have been subject to NAO, PAC and, therefore, detailed parliamentary scrutiny is now spent through 80 NDPBs. They are outside the scrutiny of the PAC and the NAO. This trend is increasing, and more so in the second category, although the level of expenditure has not quite been reached. It is about £2 billion. This is happening in the form of the companies which the Government set up or help to set up, such as the Student Loans Company.

My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary cited Remploy. Yes, the NAO can go in and carry out value-for-money exercises and then report, but it can do so only occasionally because it has limited resources. It is not the same thing as having permanent as-of-right access to various organisations when it wants it, and that is what we are asking for.

Dr. Palmer: First, I would like to reassure my right hon. Friend that my interventions are not on behalf of anybody in Whitehall but purely on my own behalf. I ask my right hon. Friend the same question that I put to the chair of the PAC. Let us take the example of Remploy. What type of information does he envisage the Comptroller and Auditor General could obtain by direct access that he could not obtain under clause 11(5)? Would he require a massive reinforcement of the staff and resources of the NAO if he were in practice, as opposed to theory, to intervene to the extent that would be needed to detect new information?

Mr. Williams: I tell my hon. Friend what he was told before. Until we have been in there, we do not know what might be there. I am not talking in general terms. Recently, if I remember correctly, we directed our attention to the Halton college of further education, to which the outside auditors had given a clean bill of health. I started with my own further education college in Swansea and then Southampton. I referred them to the NAO because I was concerned about information that I was receiving. Halton came on the scene from another source. In each case the NAO went in and carried out its audits. It found things that were missed completely or ignored by the independent auditors, possibly because they did not understand the requirements of the public sector attitude towards monitoring taxpayers' moneys.

There was one example which was ludicrous, but true. It arose as a result of an NAO auditor observing a display of affection between a chief executive and someone in that executive's outer office. On inquiry it was discovered that the person being so greeted was a close friend of the chief executive and the recipient of contracts in conflict of interest from that executive. That was an accident. Those matters would not have come to light if the NAO auditor had not been present. In the same way, we would not have found out about Halton if the NAO had not been there.

We would not have found out what was happening in the Swansea college and in Southampton if the NAO had not gone in to look. If the NAO had been there as of right all along, those problems might have been discovered earlier, things might not have got out of hand, money might not have been lost and jobs might have been saved. If my right hon. Friend would like us to prepare a reading list for him of PAC reports that demonstrate the point—I am sure that he is in pursuit of genuine education—we will gladly do it for him.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: May I point to another case that is of great interest to the House? I refer to what happened in connection with the MI5 and MI6 buildings—a horrible story. Many hon. Members are asking why it was allowed to happen, why money was spent in that way and why we did not find out sooner. Over the years, the PAC has provided many examples of what my right hon. Friend is describing.

Mr. Williams: My hon. Friend and I have worked together on various investigations of individual cases over the years. I will not bore him with them, but I will gladly tell him in private where he can find the information.

[Mr. Williams]

The NAO's powers to follow cash, as has been stated, are peculiarly limited. One can understand, perhaps, and regret that the powers of the NAO to follow cash is not equal to that of the Court of Auditors of the European Union, and we all know how deplorable recent events have been in the EU. One is bound to wonder at the duality of standards reflected in the fact that the Audit Commission, which looks into local government, has powers of investigation and inquiry which the NAO is denied.

I am told that in the erudite discussions in the corridors of the Treasury, the EU eighth directive on company law is quoted as inhibiting the freedom of the Minister to do what he would love to do and I am sure will do in the end, when he has listened to all the arguments. I can reassure him, as the Chairman of the PAC did.

We have a list of nine European countries whose equivalent to the NAO can carry out inquiries in relation to companies, but our NAO is debarred—not by EU law, but by ours. Our company law is drawn up in a particularly restrictive way, which prevents the national Parliament's auditor going in and auditing companies. The law could easily be amended, possibly in the course of the Bill.

We understood that there was to have been a draft Bill. I understand that my right hon. Friend is in an even worse position than we are, because the PAC probably saw the Bill before he did. That is the joy of going to a new Department—if a Minister is lucky, he picks up the plums that someone else has prepared, but there is also the danger of picking up what the Chairman of our Committee described as a ticking package.

Had we had the draft Bill, as we were promised, we could have carried out our own pre-legislative inquiry, as was suggested by one of my hon. Friends in an intervention. We could have gone through it in considerable detail and made our recommendations objectively. If our report was not unanimous—the Committee has never divided politically in its reports; that is a unique record—my right hon. Friend could have chosen to ignore it, but I believe that we would have come to a unanimous conclusion. We still might.

I am sure that the Chairman will give me a dispensation from parliamentary privilege if I say that I have already proposed to the Committee what was suggested in an intervention—that we should consider running, in tandem with the Bill, our own investigation into the Bill, as we would have carried it out, had we had the Bill in advance. I hope that the Committee may feel able to do that.

Mr. David Davis: I did not say that because of concern for the right hon. Gentleman's career prospects.

Mr. Williams: I live in hope—not a great deal. I tell everyone that I do not think my career has peaked yet.

The Chief Secretary said that the Bill reinforces the powers that were given in 1886. That is partially correct. It reinforces those powers in relation to an organisation that exists only in part. In that respect, the powers are the same, with one exception, with which I shall deal in a moment. However, the Bill does not reflect the spirit and the principle of 1866—the principle, as my right hon. Friend said, that all public money should be subject to detailed scrutiny by Parliament's own audit body and by Parliament itself.

Indeed, the danger of the Bill, and the reason why many of us see it as a mandarin's Bill, is that what is needed could probably have been achieved by a couple of amendments. Other than the changes relating to the PFI, the changes relating to resource accounting did not need an entire Bill. I must be of an unduly suspicious disposition, but I have the feeling that in the Treasury, eyes glistened when they saw the opportunity. Here was the chance to write in tablets of stone the restrictions that have grown by accident of restructuring over the past quarter of a century.

It is important that we do not pass the Bill in its present form. The Minister knows how difficult it is to get parliamentary time for alterations, once legislation is passed.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who is making an interesting point. Partly to correct the record, does he agree that there is another motive at work—the Treasury asserting itself against the spending Ministries? The Treasury sees the spending Ministries as dangerous loci of mis-spending and has given itself huge powers in relation to them. Our problem is that it has not given Parliament powers vis-a-vis the Treasury.

Mr. Williams: It is dangerous to follow that track. The hon. Gentleman starts me off again. Way back in history, in 1967, I joined a Department called DEA—the Department of Economic Affairs, which was set up to keep an eye on that lot—the unmentionable, to whom we are not allowed to refer, who sit in a little Box at the end of the Chamber.

The purpose of the DEA was to second-think Treasury. I well remember what went on there. As a mere Parliamentary Secretary, I remember clashes within Government and the attempts of Treasury to get rid of the DEA, which were successful, but that owes more to me, if I may say so, than to anything else. I seem to be a disaster in any Department. I have been in four Departments, and not one has survived my time there.

In the Bill, we lose some power. I know that that was not the Minister's intention, and perhaps he did not realise it. The existing Treasury PFI taskforce is subject to NAO scrutiny, but Partnerships UK will not be, so the powers of access that we still have will cease to exist with the passage of the Bill.

Transparency is a current buzzword, and that is what we are asking for. We get rid of incompetence, inefficiency, fraud and corruption only if we have clear access to the information that enables us to discover its existence. That is why I said on a point of order before our discussion on the measure that the scope of the Bill's long title is wide. It states that the Bill's purpose is:

"To make provision about Government resources and accounts; . . . and for connected purposes."

If that does not cover auditing, what on earth does?

My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary should take advantage of the inadvertent generosity of those in the Treasury who advised the draftsmen, and double his claim to a role in history by being not only the Minister who introduced resource accounting and transformed the

method of public sector accounting, but the person who restored to Parliament the rights that it had in 1866 but that were subsequently taken away.

6.21 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): On the last day of our debate on the Loyal Address, I said that I considered the Bill to be one of the most important measures of the Session. That caused comment and amusement on Conservative Benches, but I still believe that I am right. As the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) said, the reform for which the Bill provides is in the tradition of Gladstone. Some senior Members have made important speeches to point out some of the flaws in the Bill, and I hope that the Government are listening closely.

Perhaps Parliament's most important function is to hold the Government to account for the way in which they spend our taxes. If the sovereignty of Parliament means anything in the days of global capital markets, it should mean the power of the House to control Government tax and spend. However, the House has not discharged that duty well, if at all. For decades, it has acted like a eunuch towards taxpayers' cash: it has shrieked a lot—its shrill voice has often been heard—but it has not acted. That appalling legacy of parliamentary failure to examine Government accounts in the past 80 years has left those of us who support more investment in our public services with a difficult task: to persuade hard-pressed taxpayers that we will spend their cash much more wisely in future. We can do that, and the Bill goes a short way towards helping the House to achieve that aim. Therefore, we shall support the Bill in the Lobby tonight: it deserves a Second Reading.

However, Liberal Democrat Members believe that the Bill is timid and that it should constitute simply a first step towards re-empowering the House to do its constitutional job properly. We agree with many of the criticisms of the Bill made by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). However, we are more critical, and support greater reform, than the Conservatives. We shall table far-reaching amendments to the Bill in Committee and we expect the Government to take them seriously. We shall demonstrate that those amendments are not only sensible but completely in line with the principles of fiscal prudence and transparency in which the Government claim to believe.

Earlier, I made what some hon. Members may consider to be an extravagant claim. I said that the House had not done its constitutional duty on Government expenditure for more than 80 years. I shall substantiate that claim. The House has not voted down a Government expenditure proposal for 80 years. Parliament last rejected an estimate that the Executive proposed in 1919. At that time, the House reduced the royal palaces Vote and deleted the provision for an additional bathroom for the Lord Chancellor in the Houses of Parliament. That may appear to be a small matter but, given the shrill voices that were raised early in the Parliament against the current Lord Chancellor's expenditure on wallpaper, we would perhaps have expected a repetition of the 1919 vote. That did not happen. We have indeed allowed ourselves to be castrated.

Nowadays, a vote to reduce an estimate is viewed as a vote of no confidence in the Government. The last such vote on an estimate that I could find was in 1992, on a motion to reduce class XX, vote 1—contributions to the European Community. That was debated as a motion of no confidence. Worse, the House has not even granted itself the procedures that would allow it to scrutinise properly the Government's budget ex ante. As a Member of the Procedure Committee, I was involved in the recent inquiry into the House's financial procedures. I was genuinely shocked to learn the limited nature of the House's procedures to alter Government spending plans. We have allowed the Crown to keep the initiative in all financial matters. I refer hon. Members to Standing Order No. 48, whereby we formally surrender our scrutiny potency to be cut off by the ministerial knife.

I hope that you will not rule me out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I relate the House's financial impotence to Europe. Many hon. Members, especially on the Conservative Benches, say a lot about the sovereignty of Parliament, especially in the context of the debate on the euro. Most of their comments on that issue are misinformed, and many are simply wrong. Their criticisms would be more powerful if they had allowed the House to exercise its sovereignty properly during their last overlong stay in power. The previous Government did precious little to restore the House to the centre of the debate and decision making about public expenditure. A notable exception was Lord St. John of Fawsley who, as a Member of the House, promoted a private Member's Bill, which led to the National Audit Act 1983.

The Bill has a lot to do with the excellent proposal that was first mooted by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) when he was Chancellor. I want to put on record a comment that I made to him privately. History may regard the reforms that he first proposed on resource accounting and budgeting as placing his Chancellorship on a par with that of Gladstone, because he started the modernisation of the country's public finances. However, it was only a start.

That the proposals have taken so long to be introduced and that they remain so far from restoring parliamentary power over the purse show the forces that the House is up against. In assessing the Bill, we must return to first principles. We must reconsider the role that we want Parliament to take in budget setting and in scrutinising taxpayers' money.

We need to consider a simple model of the way in which Parliament can exercise its sovereignty properly and fully. There are three essential requirements for that. First, Parliament needs information about the Government's spending intentions and about the amount that they have spent. It needs a detailed and comprehensible set of spending proposals and a decent set of accounts. The Bill goes some way towards fulfilling the latter requirement.

Secondly, Parliament needs the capacity and skills to analyse the information. We need to be able to understand the proposals and the accounts that are laid before us. Can any hon. Members say, hand on heart, that they understand the appropriation accounts? Will we have the resources and training to understand the resource accounts?

There is a third condition, to which I have already alluded, if the House is to regain some control over the public purse. We need the procedures, practices and power to alter the spending proposals that are put before us and to ensure that heads roll when the reports on the spending proposals—the accounts—show that Parliament's will has not been properly done.

[Mr. Edward Davey]

Three missing elements would allow proper parliamentary scrutiny: information, resources and procedure. First, I shall deal with information, the lack of which the Bill starts to rectify. The Bill contains nothing that will radically reform the way in which we vote money. The Government have adopted their predecessors' minimalist plans for involving Parliament ex ante in budget setting. The Bill tries to change the current legislative framework, which dates back to 1866, in the most modest imaginable way. Under the Bill, appropriations will be made much as they were previously.

The Government could have put the existing non-statutory supply process on a statutory footing. The Bill could have set out proposals for the way in which the Government's spending plans should be put before Parliament, for what they should include and what they should tell the House. That has been done elsewhere, when other Governments have opted for resource accounting techniques.

Hon. Members will know that New Zealand has led the way in implementing accruals accounting and its Public Finance Act 1989 included a detailed list of the types of appropriation that a Government would have to set before Parliament every year. The New Zealand Parliament receives information on seven types of appropriation—for example, detail on what the money Parliament votes for is intended to achieve, or the output classes of appropriation, as they are called—and the Government's objective for a given sum of money is made transparent. There are other types of appropriation, including that for borrowing expenses and repayment of debt, but the House has no say on Government borrowings—none at all—and will receive none under the Bill.

Right at the start of the budgeting process, the information given to the House is partial and inadequate for us to see what the Government intend to achieve. The Bill will not change that, and I urge Ministers to consider that seriously. If we want better value for money and if we want to force Whitehall to open its books—not only to Parliament, but to Ministers themselves—why do not the Government force our great Departments of state to set out to Parliament their appropriation requests in far more detail? Resource budgeting means that Ministers and Whitehall will have better information on which to make their decisions. That is fantastic—it is a major benefit of the process—but failure to give Parliament a role at the start of the process will mean that the potential benefits will not be maximised.

To emphasise that point, I refer Ministers back to the lessons that we can learn from that great reforming Chancellor, William Gladstone. He aimed to improve the social condition of the country, but was reluctant for that to be done at the cost of a much-increased tax burden or a big increase in expenditure, so he devised his reforms over the control of public expenditure to try to square that circle. Much of what we have today in respect of overseeing and auditing expenditure—from the Public Accounts Committee to the Comptroller and Auditor General—goes back to Gladstone. Taxation and expenditure were kept under control during his periods of office, but national income increased enormously—by 20 per cent. between 1853 and 1861. If our prudent Chancellor wants radical efficiency gains in respect of the way in which the public sector uses its resources to meet ambitious social and economic objectives, I recommend that he put his trust in the House to assist that drive by giving Parliament the information on spending plans early on.

The Bill is strong in the provision of more and better information after the event—the financial reporting that will take place as a result of the resource accounting initiative. There will be a quantum leap, and I unreservedly welcome that. In particular, the removal of the bias against capital investment in the public spending process is long overdue, although there are concerns. Members of Parliament and Select Committees will have to get used to a new set of information and learn a new accounting language. We will need much more help than we have had in the past to interpret the extra information that we shall receive. We shall need to check that the extra information that is generated is not simply used for Whitehall's benefit as it goes about its managerial role but helps Parliament in its democratic role as well. The Public Accounts Committee and other Select Committees will have to be extravagant in demanding the information in a format that helps parliamentarians hold the Executive to account. That is the challenge of resource accounting, and we shall have to rise to it.

Mr. Letwin: How does the hon. Gentleman imagine that what he is seeking can conceivably be achieved unless there is clarity of definition? How does he imagine that there can be such clarity of definition without an independent body setting those definitions?

Mr. Davey: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am coming to that point and, as he will remember, I intervened on him to make similar points in that vein.

There are more deep-seated concerns about the accounting information that will be provided and the hon. Gentleman touched on some of them. The first major concern surrounds the fact that accruals accounting is inevitably more subjective than cash accounting. As the private sector continually debates its accounting procedures and has developed generally accepted accounting practice, so, too, have Governments had to tackle difficult issues in respect of valuing assets and liabilities. How does one calculate the asset value of a nuclear missile? How does one decide how to take account of inflation in presenting balance sheets? It is vital for the success of this project that such subjective issues are not used as opportunities for creative accounting. There has to be some way in which the users of the accounts can have faith in the figures as presented.

The hon. Gentleman made heavy weather of that point at times. I agree with many of his criticisms, but he seemed to forget that the previous Conservative Government, because of the approach that they took to the issue, could have been subject to all the accusations that he made against the current Government. They set up the Financial Reporting Advisory Board to provide the Government with advice on those difficult areas, but allowed it only to proffer advice. At no stage did the Conservatives give it any determining role or establish a statutory independent body that would be responsible to Parliament and allow it to consider those issues, a process that should perhaps be called the governance of public sector accounting.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that, in clause 5(2), the Treasury has given itself unfettered discretion to decide on accounting standards and I hope that, in Committee, we can jointly persuade the Government to reconsider. Liberal Democrats believe that we should develop practices similar to those used in New Zealand, the United States, Australia and Canada. New Zealand has its Accounting Standards Review Board and the United States its General Accounting Office. We wish that this country had had such offices at the start of the process, but I hope that we can now achieve them.

Mr. David Davis: I am listening to the hon. Gentleman with interest and agree with a great deal of what he is saying. I was discussing that matter the other day with Lord Burns, the previous permanent secretary at the Treasury, who offered as a model not the General Accounting Office, but the Congressional Budget Office, which is probably closer to what the hon. Gentleman is trying to achieve than the GAO.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I shall suggest later that we should have another body that is more like the Congressional Budget Office. I am suggesting here that we need a separate body to focus solely on accounting standards. The CBO does another job and we need a similar body in the House.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman has explained the point, and he and I—and, indeed, his party and my party—concur on it. Does he agree that it merely falls to the Economic Secretary to consent to the Government introducing into the Bill a proposal establishing precisely such a statutory body—something that we both seek?

Mr. Davey: Again, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I hope that he is right; I fear that he may not be. We await the Economic Secretary's winding-up speech with interest and, if the Government were to give ground on that point, the Bill would make much easier progress through the House.

I am not an accountant. I confess to having not read the resource accounting manual, which is rather large. I do not know whether the many hundreds and thousands of decisions about new accounting practices made under this initiative are fair and reasonable, but I know that, if those decisions were being taken outside Her Majesty's Treasury by a body that, like the Comptroller and Auditor General, was genuinely independent, I would trust that manual far, far more. Ministers must take that point seriously. Will the Economic Secretary consider amending the Bill so that, rather than the Treasury, the FRAB is responsible for directing accounting practices for public sector Departments and bodies? Perhaps there is a job for a different body—the Public Audit Forum, about whose role the House has heard so little. We should be told more.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Mr. Davey: I may be able to pre-empt the hon. Gentleman's intervention: I suggest that the Chief Secretary is cautious about joining his proposed commission. A shadow accounts commission will not engender much faith outside the House.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. Does he agree that, were he to go through the manual to discover the response of Departments, he would see that, on depreciation, for example, they have come up with absurdly differing schedules? Does he also agree that, if we are to have a proper depreciation account that can be consolidated sensibly, single depreciation methods would have to be applied across the Government?

Mr. Davey: I do not feel qualified to give the hon. Gentleman a full answer. There may be legitimate reasons why there are different types of depreciation for different types of assets. I honestly cannot give the hon. Gentleman a considered reply. I agree with his substantive point that we need an independent body so that we can have faith in whatever accounting standards are applied for depreciation.

We need reassurances from the Government that the new information and accounts will be constructed on an independent basis. If it is too late to affect the construction stage of the new accounts, the Government could ensure that all future revisions and changes are independently determined, not Treasury directed.

Resource accounting and budgeting is not just about accruals accounting, but about new information on outputs and performance. Alongside the new balance sheets and schedules, the Government will publish something called an output and performance analysis. That information is to assist the quest for better value for money, and is welcome. However, the Bill makes no provision for auditing that information. The Comptroller and Auditor General will not be able to certify it. There may be good, practical reasons for not auditing it in the first year or two, but the National Audit Office will not even be able to validate it. That is a real concern, which I know is shared by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. I hope that we can rectify that during the passage of the Bill.

If Parliament is to take this new information seriously, a third party must examine those statistics to ensure that they give a true and fair account of what has happened. It is not just the information that we will get, which will have to be monitored carefully, but the information that we will not get that is worrying many. Hon. Members have already expressed concerns about issues such as which public sector bodies will be covered by the new resource accounts and which will not be, and whether the National Audit Office will have jurisdiction over those accounts. The right hon. Members for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) and for Haltemprice and Howden discussed those points in some detail, and I associate the Liberal Democrats with their remarks on extending the institutional jurisdiction of the National Audit Office.

The Government may say that clauses 10 and 11 on Government accounts will help to bring that about. In the explanatory notes and the code of fiscal stability, the Government say that their intention is to prepare consolidated accounts for all public sector bodies—but when? There is no time scale, and there is certainly no independent body to oversee them: only the Treasury will decide.

The House has no guarantee that all public sector money will eventually be properly accounted for and audited. That is not good enough. The Government may mean well, but the House should remind them that the

[Mr. Davey]

Comptroller and Auditor General has independence for good reason. The House of Commons and the public need to know that audits of public money are genuinely independent. We will still need to know about the billions of pounds of taxpayers' money that currently falls outside the ambit of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Whitehall has been preoccupied trying to prepare resource accounts for central Government. Governments can always use the excuse that a narrow focus is the right way to start but, if Ministers do not set ambitious targets for the public sector, they will never meet them. Frankly, the delays and problems in preparing for resource accounting and budgeting suggest that Ministers need a different approach to obtaining whole of Government accounts. Unless the civil service is required by statute to provide Parliament with this information by a certain date, I doubt whether this exercise will be seen in Whitehall to have the priority that it ought to have.

Before I leave the subject of improving financial information for Parliament, I want to touch on an issue raised by clause 9 on the access rights of the Comptroller and Auditor General to accounting information. Other hon. Members have raised this point, and it goes back to my point about the need to widen the jurisdiction of the CAG. Far too often, the National Audit Office's access rights to information are on the basis of agreement and not on a statutory basis. If the country's top financial watchdog is to have the teeth it needs, it should have the statutory right to examine all papers of any public body. That would surely be the most secure way to ensure that all fraud and malpractice is wiped out. I commend the Government for abolishing the previous Government's practice of allowing civil servants routinely to mark documents "Not for NAO eyes" but, as I have argued, they need to go further.

Earlier in my remarks, I said that, if we are to re-empower the House to do its job of financial scrutiny properly, we need to go back to first principles. We need to consider the information, resources and procedures that Parliament has at its disposal to examine the Budget. I have spent some time on information aspects, because that is the core of the Bill, but I want to say a few words about the House's resources—individual MPs and Select Committees—and its procedures, because they are crucial to our ability to use this new information productively.

The vast bulk of the work of the House in analysing the Government's accounts is done by the PAC with the help of the NAO. They consider what has already happened—ex-post analysis of spending and examination of the accounts. Parliament needs to be involved at the start of the public spending process. That would mark a radical departure, but I believe that the House should play a much more active role in scrutinising budgets ex ante.

I have been very much influenced by the recent inquiry of the Select Committee on Procedure, which led to our sixth report "Procedure for Debate on the Government's Expenditure Plans". Under the able chairmanship of the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), the Committee came up with significant proposals in this area. Liberal Democrats would like to go further, but our ideas are very much in the spirit of that report.

If the House is to become involved in analysing spending proposals ex ante in a thorough and meaningful way, we will need more resources. That point was made time and again to the Procedure Committee by witnesses. I am afraid to say that the Committee did not come up with a firm and single conclusion as to what resources should be available and how they should be organised—whether there should be more resources for the Select Committee on the Treasury or a new free-standing body, which the report calls an "estimates office". Liberal Democrats favour the latter proposal. We believe that the House needs a new and authoritative body to assist in the work of scrutinising spending plans. Such a body should, like the NAO, be independent of Government, but, unlike the NAO—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman well knows that this is a Second Reading debate. He is stretching beyond the scope of the debate.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for your remarks, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am about to relate my points to the Bill.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I was not so much making remarks: it was more of an instruction.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for that instruction, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Liberal Democrats believe that such a body would be able to apply the information from resource accounting and budgeting to ensure that the new accounts can be used effectively for the scrutiny of public money. An estimates office could be staffed by experienced accountants and economists, could assist individual MPs and Committees to trawl through the estimates and resource accounts, could model alternative spending proposals, and advise on the practicality of switching expenditures. Such bodies exist in other countries—for example, the Congressional Budget Office in the USA. When the Government get round to replying to the report of the Procedure Committee and to answering questions in the Standing Committee, I hope that they will agree to establishing such a body and ensuring that it is well resourced.

However, resources alone will not be sufficient to enable the House to use the new resource accounts. We will have to encourage Committees to utilise those new resources. Above all, we will need to change the procedures to enable amendments to be tabled to estimates so that debate can be real.

The Procedure Committee rightly proposes that it should be a requirement imposed on all departmental Select Committees to report back to the main House, under a set timetable, on the estimates and accounts submitted by their Department. That report should come to the House before the estimates are voted on and the accounts are signed off. It should be able to contain proposals to change the proposed estimates—for example, to switch resources from one area to another. Such a new freedom would encourage Select Committees to scrutinise spending proposals in much greater detail.

The Procedure Committee made a number of new proposals on how the House could amend or table motions about particular estimates. I should have liked the Committee to go further. It shied away from challenging the principle of the financial initiative of the Crown. It did not seek the right of the House to recommend increases in

the estimates, and it did not consider some aspects of resource accounting. I understood why colleagues balked at that idea, but I think that we should have been braver.

Since our report was published, I have been studying the relatively new procedures for resource accounting adopted in the New Zealand Parliament.

The new procedures give Members an increased role in setting budgets, and provide a control for the Executive when new spending proposals could undermine prudent financial control. As a result of resource accounting, and under new standing orders that have operated since 1996, Members of the New Zealand Parliament can propose not only changes to Votes—including increases—but spending increases in regard to Bills. Individual Members can even propose spending increases by means of an amendment to a Bill, or a motion which, if passed, would become law. That constitutes direct parliamentary involvement, ex ante, in the public-expenditure process.

Financial anarchy, however, is avoided through a new device called the financial veto certificate. If the New Zealand Government believe that a spending proposal would have more than a minor impact on the Crown's finances, they can veto that proposal, and the veto cannot be voted on or overturned.

I think that that procedure strikes the right balance between the legislature and the Executive. If adopted here, it would give Members and departmental Select Committees a real incentive to involve themselves in an ex ante scrutiny of the budget, and would re-establish the House's role in public expenditure for the first time for 80 years, ensuring that we could use resource accounting and budgeting to the full extent.

That major change would then impact on the House's ex-post analysis of the budget when it examined the accounts. I believe that the PAC does a good job at present. I know that its Chairman, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, is highly regarded by parties on both sides of the House, and I am delighted that he will be helped in future by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), but they have an almost impossible task, and resource accounting will, if anything, set the Committee an even tougher challenge. If more Members became actively involved in analysis of spending plans, and if more resources were generally available to Members through an estimates office, the knock-on effect for the PAC would be significant.

The National Audit Office serves the PAC well, but I hope that future requests for money made by the Public Accounts Commission will be far more ambitious. Given the many new developments in public sector accounting, the NAO needs extra resources to enable it to help the PAC and departmental Select Committees to scrutinise the audit far more effectively.

The Bill has several other aspects on which I would have liked to comment at length—for instance, the clauses relating to the Welsh Assembly and the national health service, and the proposal to establish Partnerships UK. Why, for example, is relatively little still known about the proposal to take on the PFI and public-private partnerships? Is it because, as some commentators have suggested, there is a potential conflict of interests? I hope that the Minister will reassure us that, before the Standing Committee deals with clauses 15 to 17, we shall have a much fuller and more detailed report on a proposal that currently strikes many of us as half-baked.

The Chief Secretary said that the Bill was intended only to transfer current financial and procedural arrangements to a resource accounting framework. He said that it was not intended to reform other aspects of the House's financial procedures, or to reform the auditing process, including the powers and jurisdiction of the NAO. That may be true, but I believe that it is the will of the House and its most senior Committees to use the Bill to tackle just those issues. I urge the right hon. Gentleman, between Second Reading and the Committee stage, to consider all the points that have been raised, and to consider how the Bill's ambitions can be raised to a much higher plain.

6.54 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I shall speak briefly, because many of my points have already been made. I shall concentrate on a fairly narrow area. If I make the odd error, it is because many years have passed since I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee—I think that I left in 1991—and much of what I shall say will be based on my experience during 11 interesting years.

After leaving the PAC, I reached the view that anyone who wished to become a Minister should serve an apprenticeship on that Committee. In my opinion, no parliamentary process is more enriching in providing those who want to be Ministers with the information that they need, not only on public accounting, but on how to deal with civil servants—and, indeed, how to understand the way in which civil servants are motivated.

I may be speaking out of turn, but I asked the National Audit Office for a brief, because I felt that the issue was important. I apologise to the NAO if I am not supposed to quote from the brief directly, but I shall do so because some aspects have caused me concern. Paragraph 17 states:

> "The Government Resources and Accounts Bill as currently drafted threatens to weaken the independence of the Comptroller and Auditor General and his relationship to Parliament."

That stark statement represents a lost opportunity to bring the powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General up to date, and to ensure that he can continue to provide Parliament with effective scrutiny of public expenditure under modern government.

All this is, of course, in the name of an Officer of Parliament. It is like the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, through her little department, writing a report for Parliament attacking a Government recommendation: in my view, it has the same status. We all forget that the Comptroller and Auditor General is an Officer of Parliament, which is why what is said in the briefing is so important.

I was somewhat reassured, however, by my right hon. Friend's responses from the Dispatch Box. I hope that the NAO will pore over them. Its representatives, who are present, ought to speak to my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) about the responses that we have received from a Treasury Minister. We discussed the extent to which those responses met the concerns expressed in the NAO brief. I was satisfied by the Minister's statement that he was prepared to discuss these matters with the Committee. He also said that there would be no change in the nature of access under the new arrangement, in relation to the present position. Although he did not respond on the issue of evidence being taken by the PAC on the new arrangements, I thought I saw him

[Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours]

nod for a moment. I hope that that is an indication to the Treasury that he, too, would like Treasury officials to give evidence to the PAC on the arrangements that are being made.

I want to refer specifically to the NAO's power to go in and look for the truth. On a number of occasions when I was a member of the PAC—and, indeed, after I left—I asked the NAO to carry out an investigation. It involved a training company. It went in and did what I can describe only as a bloomin' good job. In many ways, it was acting very much in the public interest. The investigation led, in all cases, to a good deal of publicity—not about me as a Member of Parliament, but about the NAO and the work that it had been doing to establish the truth.

I go pretty well all over the world nowadays to lecture on constitutional matters—not only matters involving the British constitution—and I always include a section on financial accountability and public accounting. I believe that the NAO's work is critical to the democratic arrangement that exists in the United Kingdom. Paragraph 15 of the NAO briefing states:

"The Bill to be presented to the House has . . . no provision for the Comptroller and Auditor General to have the necessary statutory access to examine the large amounts of public money spent by new forms of service provider including private contractors and voluntary bodies (such as private contractors handling £4 billion of central government pay".

I find it unimaginable that, although those contractors may well be private limited companies, we do not have the statutory right—given that they are handling Government money—to check their operations to ensure that they are handling that money in the way in which it should be handled.

The briefing also states that private contractors manage six prisons, including Doncaster and the Wolds. Why should we not have statutory access? Taxpayers' money is being used. In every case, we should have access. The briefing says that those contractors spend

"£5.2 billion of public money"—

taxpayers' money—

"providing New Deal training opportunities".

How interesting. The Chief Secretary was the Minister responsible for setting up the new deal, which has been very successful. I would have thought that he would be the first to secure access not by way of a nod and a wink—but a statutory right of access to pursue the last penny, wherever it is used in delivering the new deal arrangement, whether it be a private company offering training facilities in Workington, or whatever. The NAO should have a statutory right to go in at every level to check how that resource is used.

The briefing says that voluntary sector registered social landlords receive

"about £1 billion annually to provide services locally on behalf of central government".

Again, I cannot see why a statutory right of access should not be enshrined in legislation. The anger almost in the NAO briefing is over the fact that the Bill does not provide for such access.

The briefing states that the Bill has

"no provision for the Comptroller and Auditor General to be the auditor of all executive non-departmental public bodies (so that he is not the auditor of about eighty such bodies receiving over £3 billion annually from Parliamentary grant—these include the Housing Corporation which spends almost a billion and the Environment Agency which spends £150 million)".

I know that we have a level of access. I know that there is access through VFM—value for money—but I am talking about a statutory right of access with no resistance, no questions. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) had to plead for access to the Housing Corporation. He had to plead for access to a number of organisations. There should be no question of pleading; it should be a statutory right.

The briefing states that the Bill contains

"no provision for the Comptroller and Auditor General to be appointed the auditor of limited companies established by central government bodies (there are over 200 of these such as the Student Loans Company and Remploy, spending nearly £3 billion each year from public funds)".

That is only the beginning. We all know that, increasingly, public administration is being turned over to such private companies. Early on, some of us resisted that move, but benefits have arisen from the shift. If that is the way that public administration is going, with private companies increasingly having a role, surely we must have the right to follow the last copper into the coffers of those companies to ensure that money is spent properly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) intervened to ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), to give examples of what was meant by

"following public money in all circumstances",

particularly where the body that was the subject of NAO scrutiny was subcontracting work and where possibly that money was not fully accounted for. I jotted down a few examples.

I am sure that every hon. Member here would agree that, if the Department for Education and Employment gives money to the Further Education Funding Council, that should be subject to NAO access—a statutory right of access. If the council gives it to a college in my constituency, the NAO should have a statutory right of access to that college as well. I go even further. If the college then hires a catering company to do work within the college in my constituency of Workington, in theory, if it is taxpayers' money, even the catering company potentially should be subject to the NAO's statutory right of access, if such scrutiny were necessary. I am advocating not that the NAO should necessarily exercise that statutory right of access, but that it should have that right to pursue public money wherever it wants.

I have referred to the new deal. I remember a particularly famous case where I called for a series of inquiries into training companies.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Will the hon. Gentleman clarify the matter? Is he saying that the NAO should have a statutory right of access to the books of any supplier to the public sector?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Not necessarily to any supplier; it depends on the nature of the supplier. If a bread manufacturer supplies bread to a Government Department, I do not think that the NAO would necessarily want to study that manufacturer's accounts—the contract between the manufacturer and the Department

will be an open-market contract—but, if the Department had to employ the bread contractor to carry out some catering internally within its own organisation and it had to employ people, there may have to be a statutory right of access. If someone is using public money—taxpayers' money—the taxpayer should have a right of access to ensure that the money is spent properly.

I take the question of the new Learning and Skills Council. Money will be allocated nationally by the Department for Education and Employment to the national council. On the basis of the White Paper "Learning to Succeed", which was published earlier this year, I presume that the council will then allocate money to regional skills and training councils. Those will allocate money to training providers. I understand that money will also be allocated to lifelong learning partnerships. Wherever public money goes, the taxpayer has a right to follow it, through a statutory right of access, to the organisation that is given that money.

I was talking to my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) about the arrangements for Railtrack. I do not know whether the PAC has found some remit—he might be able to tell me—under which it could look at the way in which Railtrack uses money, some of which starts with the taxpayer and passes through train operating companies. I do not know what the arrangements are, but I presume—indeed, I hope—that, under the arrangement, any public subsidy to manage Britain's railway system—any public money—should be traceable. An audit should lead to the area where it is ultimately spent.

I argue a simple principle, in which I have always believed—if public money is to be spent, the taxpayer should have a right of access to ensure that that money is properly spent.

7.8 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): It is an interesting debate. I hope that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury is noting, as no doubt the Chief Secretary did, that there is a certain amount of concern about the Bill and criticism of it from hon. Members on both sides and from all political parties in the House.

I was particularly interested in the remarks of the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams). He said that, after 35 years in this place, his career had not yet peaked. It gave me great encouragement. I hope that, after 28 years in this place, my career has not peaked either, although—he is well aware of it—it has not even yet taken off, unlike his. He has held important offices in past Labour Governments.

The leadership of the Liaison Committee by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) is much appreciated. As he will know, the Liaison Committee is currently conducting an inquiry into the relationship between Select Committees and the Executive—the Government. Many of the remarks made today by him, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis)—who is Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee—and by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) have served to make the point that Select Committees are able to play a very valuable role in monitoring the Government.

How right the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton was that Select Committees should be able to amend the estimates, to allow for virement within total expenditure of a particular Department, to highlight the Committee's interests and priorities. I think that, if that became the House's order of procedure, the role of Select Committees—which are vital—would carry much more weight, many more hon. Members would want to serve on Select Committees, and Select Committee reports would be much more meaningful. I hope that not only will my Committee continue to make recommendations in that sphere, but that the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne and my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden will ensure that the need for such change is taken on board by the Government.

I should like today to make only a short speech, in my capacity as Chairman of the Procedure Committee. I do not intend to examine in detail the Bill's provisions, as that is a matter for those who know far more about the subject than I do, and is also the responsibility of the Standing Committee. However, I should like to put down two markers arising out of the Procedure Committee's recent work—one is an expression of dissatisfaction with the way in which the Government have handled the Bill's introduction, and the other is an aspiration of how the Government should proceed in future.

As the House will know, the Procedure Committee has taken a very close interest in proposals to introduce resource accounting and budgeting into the public service. On that, we have worked in close liaison with the Treasury Committee and with the Public Accounts Committee.

We have also produced two reports of relevance to the Bill. In March 1998, the Committee's report entitled, "Resource Accounting and Budgeting" appeared and, in July 1999, we published a connected report, "Procedure for Debate on the Government's Expenditure Plans". We have received a Government reply to the first of the two reports, but not, as yet, to the second.

I am happy to say that, broadly speaking, the Committee has welcomed the proposed shift from cash-based to accruals-based accounting within government. In March 1998, the Committee commented that

"resource accounting and budgeting should not be oversold as a miracle cure but can be viewed as a useful contribution both in terms of improving value for money from public expenditure and of enhancing accountability to Parliament".

The report "Resource Accounting and Budgeting" contained a recommendation to which the Committee attached very great importance. It was that

"the most extensive version of the amendments which might be made to the Exchequer and Audit Acts should be published in draft as soon as possible".

I direct that quote to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury.

The Government reply to that report, published in June 1998, was quite unequivocal on that point, stating:

"The Government accepts the Committee's recommendation. The Government agrees that there are advantages in publishing the suggested amendments to the Exchequer and Audit Departments Acts in draft to enable Parliament to give the proposed legislation thorough consideration, and will publish its proposals as soon as possible".

In March 1999—nine months later—we received a short memorandum from the Treasury, setting out

"the Government's policy proposals for the legislative changes needed to implement Resource Accounting and Budgeting".

Although useful in itself, that very modest paper was only six pages long.

[Mr. Nicholas Winterton]

The paper certainly did not amount to the "most extensive version" of the draft legislation which the Procedure Committee had asked for and the Government had undertaken to provide. Indeed, the Treasury itself described its paper as

"an initial basis for considering the legislative proposals for RAB in advance of publication of"—

and I emphasis this—

"the draft Bill".

It is therefore clear that, in March 1999, the Government still intended to introduce the Bill in Parliament in draft form. That commitment was repeated as recently as July 1999, in a report by the Treasury to the Procedure, Treasury and Public Accounts Committees, which stated:

"a draft Bill will be published later in the current session".

After that date, however, we heard nothing until two weeks ago, when the Clerks of the three Committees that I mentioned received a letter from Mr. John Breckenridge, of the Treasury's RAB legislation team, stating:

"I am afraid that it took much longer than expected to draft the Bill and a complete version only became available shortly before introduction. I apologise for not having been able to send the Committees a draft of the Bill when we had undertaken to do so."

I wish to put on record my strong disappointment that the Government have not been able to honour their clear undertaking to the Procedure Committee—which is not only a Committee of the House, but an important Committee of the House—that the Bill would be published in draft form.

The Government have been a strong supporter of the principle of pre-legislative scrutiny. In evidence to the Modernisation Committee, the previous Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor) wrote:

"the Government firmly believes that the quality of legislation can often be improved by consultation with informed opinion on both the substance and the drafting of legislative proposals, before the introduction of a bill into Parliament or at a stage in its passage through Parliament".

In the present case, with a Bill that is both important and highly technical, surely the most appropriate form of scrutiny would have been at the pre-legislative stage. The accumulated expertise of three Select Committees could then have been brought to bear. Instead, it seems that the interests of Whitehall have prevailed over those of Parliament, and Committees of the House are effectively being sidelined in consideration of the Bill's contents.

How right the right hon. Member for Swansea, West was when he said that, when he was a Minister, his priority was still to act as a Member of Parliament. He also talked about the primacy of the House of Commons and the important role that we play in holding to account the Government of the day. How better could the House do that than through control of the vote of Supply? That is the way that it should be done. I hope that, in reply to the debate, the Economic Secretary will be able to give the House a fuller explanation than that in Mr. Breckenridge's letter of why the Government have failed to honour their clear undertaking.

Given that the Government have failed to allow Parliament—in the words of the former Leader of the House—to "consult with informed opinion" at the pre-legislative stage, is there not a strong case for such an opportunity to be given during the Bill's passage? As Chairman of the Procedure Committee, I propose to the Government that the Bill should be referred to a Special Standing Committee, as that would enable the Committee to hold Select Committee-style evidence sittings before considering the Bill clause by clause. It would be up to the Committee to decide which witnesses to invite, but I should have thought that evidence from Treasury civil servants—who have come in for some remarks and even criticism in this debate—from the Comptroller and Auditor General and from appropriate outside experts on financial procedure would help to inform the Committee's deliberation.

Those three evidence sessions would not add hugely to the timetable for enacting the Bill. Under Standing Orders, the Select Committee stage must be completed within

"a period not exceeding 28 days".

The Bill has been introduced at an early stage in this Session, so it certainly cannot be argued that there is not enough parliamentary time for the procedure to be activated.

I draw the Economic Secretary's attention to the fact that a motion to commit a Bill to a Special Standing Committee can be moved without notice, immediately after Second Reading. I very much hope that she, or the Chief Secretary, will move such a motion. That would be appropriate for a Bill which is technical and important, and about which it ought in principle to be possible to achieve cross-party consensus.

Mr. Letwin: When I saw my hon. Friend's name on the Annunciator, I swallowed my meal with great haste and came into the Chamber. I am glad that I did so. Is not what he is saying an assertion of parliamentary sovereignty that would have far wider implications than this Bill, and would be welcome on both fronts?

Mr. Winterton: I hope that it would, and I believe that I am making this request of the Government with a great deal of cross-party support. The Government have stated time and again that they are in favour of pre-legislative scrutiny. Here is an opportunity for them to show whether they mean it.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: If the Opposition had not sought to divide the House this evening, we may have been nearer to securing that objective. If I remember rightly, when the National Audit Act went through the House in 1983, we did not have any Divisions because the House saw it as a House issue. I cannot understand why the Opposition have decided to turn this issue into a political football. I am not making a political point—I am being serious. Why have they done it? It is quite unnecessary. If they had not done so, they might have secured a more sympathetic hearing from Ministers.

Mr. Winterton: I am speaking as the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, and I am not seeking to be party political in any way. I am seeking to represent the interests of this House. That is why I have made this request, although I have done so at 7.22 pm, when there is a vote at 10 pm. Despite that, I hope that the Government will give serious consideration to it.

Mr. Key: I think that I am right in saying that I am the only Member tonight, on either side of the House, who

has served on such a Committee—on the quinquennial Armed Forces Bill. I can vouch for the value of that procedure, which is a huge improvement on most of the legislative steps we take in this House. I hope that the Government will take up my hon. Friend's suggestion.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support for my proposal.

Above all, reference to a Special Standing Committee would do something to make amends for the Government's failure to consult at the drafting stage. I give full credit to them—they have apologised for that. It would enable the Committee to give balanced consideration to some of the major issues that the Bill raises.

One of those issues is whether the Bill, as drafted, gives too much unfettered discretion to the Treasury to regulate the operation of resource accounting. This was referred to by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, a past Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee; my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden, the current Chairman of the PAC; the right hon. Member for Swansea, West; and the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton. Clearly, it does raise some concerns.

Mr. Alan Williams: I see that the shadow deputy Leader of the House, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), is in his place. This has been virtually a unanimous debate so far, and has been listened to seriously by Ministers because, clearly, it is a House of Commons debate, as my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) said. Can I appeal to the hon. Member for South Staffordshire? I know that there is limited time, so perhaps the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) will endorse this suggestion. Between now and 10 o'clock, would the hon. Member for South Staffordshire take party politics out of this matter, in the hope that we can get a meaningful and positive reply from the Government?

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that constructive and rational proposal, which I hope was heard by my hon. Friends.

Mr. David Davis: Hear, hear.

Mr. Winterton: My right hon. Friend agrees. Clearly, there is a great deal of common ground across the House.

The creation of the financial reporting advisory body is a welcome development, but there is a strong argument for augmenting the board's independence from the Treasury by putting it on a statutory basis and giving it its own independent secretariat. That would increase the public credibility of the RAB process.

I hope that the Minister can enlighten us on the trigger points outlined in the Treasury's 1998 memorandum. The Treasury stated that these were intended

"to provide Parliament with reassurance during the transitional period leading to full implementation of RAB that satisfactory progress is being made."

This matter has been raised during the debate. Trigger point 3 was the audit by the NAO of Departments' dry-run 1998–99 resource accounts. That was due to be completed during the autumn of this year. The Treasury has described trigger point 3 as

"the final, and most important phase of the process of implementing resource accounting, since it will determine whether all departments are on track to implement RAB successfully".

It would be helpful if the Economic Secretary could report to the House this evening on the progress on this trigger point. Have all Departments submitted their dry-run resource accounts to the NAO? If not, which Departments have failed to do so? Has the Government had any preliminary feedback from the NAO on the quality of the dry-run accounts?

I wish to refer to the Procedure Committee's report on parliamentary scrutiny of the Government's expenditure plans. In the Committee's view, there is a clear link between the proposed introduction of resource accounting and the need to reform the current arrangements for such scrutiny. The report stated that

"resource accounting and budgeting should result in more, and better, information being presented in Estimates and annual reports".

The Leader of the House has said that all will be much more transparent to Members of Parliament in assessing the decisions which the Government are making, and that can only be a good thing. We concluded that our proposals for reform of expenditure scrutiny

"are a logical extension of the Government's policies"

on resource accounting. There are no party politics here. We are seeking to improve the information coming to this House to enable it to debate and consider these matters more sensibly.

Mr. Drew: I apologise to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) for missing the start of his speech, but I am glad that he made that point. Does he agree that the key to parliamentary scrutiny is how we encourage Select Committees to take up the proper examination through the new methodology?

Mr. Winterton: The hon. Gentleman is right, and he has picked up a matter that was raised with great emphasis by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne. Clearly, it is important that Select Committees should find time to look at the estimates, and I have indicated that they should be able to amend the estimates. That would give them a real job to do in dealing with a particular Department, and would make the reports more meaningful. I hope that, with the advent of sittings in Westminster Hall, there will be greater opportunity for debating Select Committee reports.

This is not the time to set out the Procedure Committee's proposals in detail—you would rightly rule me out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker—but hon. Members can read and assess them in our report, which is available in the Vote Office. I simply urge the Government to give us a speedy and sympathetic response to those proposals and to bear in mind that we regard them as the integral link between the changes set out in the Bill and the opportunity to reform and improve the capacity of the House to scrutinise Government legislation. This is clearly a matter to which the Procedure Committee will return.

7.30 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said that the Bill is the biggest reform since the era of Gladstone. The need for reform is underlined by the fact that the legislation with which we are dealing dates back to 1866 and 1921. When we consider how the world, and especially Government expenditure and programmes, have changed since then, it is clear that the accounting rules by which we operate need to change too.

There is cross-party consensus on the issue. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), introducing his 1993 Budget, said that Government accounting for public spending had become archaic, and that the time had come to move to a system of accounting that identified more clearly the costs of resources. The Government are implementing that. I hazard a guess that, had the Conservative party won the 1997 general election, a broadly similar Bill would eventually have been introduced.

The case for change is very strong. The changes to resource accounting will mean that Departments produce accounts in a form broadly consistent with United Kingdom commercial practice. That has not been emphasised so far, but it is welcome. There is a consensus that the private sector should be involved in developing public services, so it does not make sense to have a different set of accounting procedures across the sectors, especially if we want to transfer staffing and experience between them. We do not want to encourage people with financial or strategic experience to spend their whole working lives in only one sector.

I have never understood the treatment of capital expenditure in Government accounts. When one spends money on a capital asset, the benefit that accrues from that asset clearly lasts for a significant period, and certainly longer than one year, so it is entirely right for capital expenditure to be spread over the depreciation period. As long as an eye is kept on the balance sheet and the cash flow to ensure that the overall level of activity is financeable, that proposition in the Bill makes sense.

I was attracted by what the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said about the change making clear to the Treasury the degree to which public assets are depreciating. Under the current system, that is not always the case. The change should also lead to more informed decision making on capital expenditure. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) highlighted the fact that there is a significant bias against capital spending in the current rules, with all the costs hitting the income and expenditure account in full in the first year of acquisition.

Hon. Members might respond to that by asking whether it makes a difference. I have been struck over the years by the fact that the public sector in its spending decisions does not appear to have as much understanding as the private sector of the need for capital investment. It cannot be denied that the current construction of the rules has an influence on that.

The changes will have a positive impact on the output side, with resource accounting for the first time requiring Departments to report systematically on how their resources are allocated in accordance with their aims and objectives and on what is achieved as a result. That is entirely right and proper.

We have tended over the years to have a fairly polarised debate between those who say that the solution to everything is more money and those who say that it is a question not of the amount but of the way in which the money is used. I believe that in order to improve our public services we need to spend more, but it should certainly be an imperative to analyse critically how we can get the best results with the amount that we put in. We should welcome the requirement in the Bill that the resources allocated should be in accordance with the aims and objectives.

Mr. Letwin: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive the fact that this intervention has relatively little to do with his speech. The House may want to know that the Opposition will be more than happy not to divide the House if the Economic Secretary promises to follow the suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and refer the Bill to a Special Standing Committee.

Mr. Rammell: I am not sure whether I should give a response to that. It is a welcome suggestion. The criticism that has been made time and again of the Bill concerns the extent of the NAO's scrutiny powers, but that is not addressed in the reasoned amendment, so the Opposition's offer is a welcome, non-partisan move.

The changes will improve transparency and make it clearer what benefit the public are getting for the money raised through taxation. I hope and believe that that will inform future spending decisions and allocations.

The Public Accounts Committee has picked up the point that, once the changes are made, it is crucial that significant training and development are provided for both civil servants and Members of Parliament on the way in which the new rules operate. If we want everyone to understand the overall objectives, and to have an informed debate, it is crucial to ensure that everyone is up to speed.

I was particularly struck by the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), who expressed concern that the Bill as drafted would weaken the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office. Given my hon. Friend's experience and expertise, we should all take that criticism seriously, but my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said that there is no change in the Bill to the role, power and responsibilities of the Comptroller and Auditor General. That gives some reassurance. The matter will certainly be taken up in Committee.

Concern has been expressed that the role of the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General does not go far enough, in that there is no power to examine organisations that involve substantial sums of public money, such as the Student Loans Company and Remploy. I have much sympathy with that view, but that is the situation that obtains now. Nothing in the Bill would make that situation worse. A powerful case can be made for changing the auditing procedures, but that is not what the Bill is about. It is about the change to resource accounting, and that is one of the issues that should be picked up in Committee.

Another criticism was put forward by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who is no longer in his place, about the working families tax credit and the overall argument that the Government can designate

particular items as taxation or public spending, according to their will—that the WFTC, by being designated as a tax cut as opposed to Government spending, artificially reduces taxation as a proportion of national income. The degree of concern expressed by the hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members is undermined by the fact that for two thirds of the time in office of the previous Government mortgage tax relief was categorised in the same way, as were private medical insurance relief and life assurance premium relief. I hope that we can now put that issue to bed.

The hon. Member for West Dorset called for an independent accounts commission to bring clarity to the issue, reach agreed accounting standards and provide a firm statistical base on which to measure any changes the Government wish to make. That is an important issue, when one recalls how often the calculation of the unemployment figures was changed by the previous Government. However, I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman is committing his party to accepting in full the recommendations of such an independent commission. If not, I suggest that the novelty of his request is not what it might seem at first glance.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman may be sad to hear it, but the answer is yes. We commit ourselves lock, stock and barrel to the acceptance of the propositions put forward by Sir Bryan Carsberg and his colleagues on the committee, and to enacting those recommendations when we return to power in the next Parliament.

Mr. Rammell: I would be interested to learn the terms of reference of that committee and its membership, to ensure that it genuinely is independent rather than something set up to achieve a specific purpose.

Mr. Letwin: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not calling into question the bona fides of the chairman of the International Committee for Accounting Standards, who is also probably Britain's most distinguished living accountant. He will be accompanied by senior partners from major accounting firms and others whose integrity is unimpeachable.

Mr. Rammell: I do not question the committee's integrity, but the terms of reference and the overall membership could affect the outcome. The hon. Gentleman will need to convince us that the terms of reference and the membership were structured so that an objective outcome would result.

It has been said that the Bill would have been an ideal subject for pre-legislative scrutiny and I agree, especially as there is a cross-party consensus on it. That is when we are most in danger of allowing things to slip through. The Child Support Agency is one example of that happening, as we have learned to our cost. I understand the time constraints under which the Government have operated, but it would have been better if we could have created an opportunity for pre-legislative scrutiny.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) said that it was more than 80 years since a Government had been defeated on a budgetary measure. That statistic demonstrates the power of the Executive over the legislature, and in response we need an honest and grown-up debate. One of the problems is that every party in opposition calls for better scrutiny and suggests that it would be a good idea for the Government to be defeated on a financial measure, but every party takes a different view when in government. It would be a brave Government who said that they were relaxed about their estimates being defeated. *[Interruption.]* I see that my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary is concerned. I do not suggest that this Government need necessarily be that brave Government.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton also raised the issue of the allocation of proper resources for effective parliamentary scrutiny of accounting and financial issues, and that point is well made. He argued the case for increased resources for the Select Committee on the Treasury or the estimates office. One could also make the case for additional resources for Members of Parliament—in office costs allowance rather than salaries—to enable them to perform the job of scrutiny on those issues. We get the parliamentary scrutiny that we pay for and, at the moment, it is inadequately resourced.

I welcome the establishment and funding of Partnerships UK. The private finance initiative is here to stay and can make a significant contribution to funding public sector projects. However, it must be done in the right way. There will always be a trade off between the cost of doing something through the private sector and the speed at which change can be achieved. The hospital building programme underlines that point. We must expand the knowledge and skills that are available to support PFIs. We often miss opportunities because the skills, experience and expertise are lacking. We also need a clear set of criteria for the way in which Partnerships UK will support PFI on the ground. A limited sum will be available—£170 million has been suggested—and it is therefore crucial that the projects that are supported are those with the greatest applicability and the most ground-breaking.

The Government propose introducing resource accounting to local authority housing finance and, as part of that process, removing rent rebates from housing revenue accounts. I am conscious that that is not specifically within the remit of the Bill, but as it establishes the principle of resource accounting, it will affect that initiative. It was announced by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions last week that proposals would be published in line with the Bill. I strongly support the principle behind the proposed changes, because it is indefensible that under the current system rent payers—instead of the whole community through the general fund—bear the responsibility for funding rent rebates. The Government's proposals will address that issue, but in some local authorities—I declare an interest, because my local authority in Harlow is one of them—negative subsidy is transferred from the housing revenue account to the general fund and that transfer will cease. The process is an historical anomaly, and has been going on for nine years. It has been recognised and supported both by the previous Government and this Government. It affects a small number of local authorities—23 in total—but it has an enormous impact on them—in my local authority, £3.4 million out of a total annual budget of £13.5 million.

The Government have announced that there will be transitional measures to ease that transfer, but those measures will have to last for a very long time. There is a case for the Government dealing with the matter by

[Mr. Rammell]

making available additional subsidy for what is an historical quirk that affects only a handful of opportunities. I realise that that point is a slight diversion from the main issues being debated this evening, but I wanted to put it on the record.

The Bill is an important first step. The principles are right for what is a long overdue modernisation, and there is consensus on many matters. I hope that we can build on that in Committee and in future legislation. The Bill underlines the extent to which the Government are introducing changes that will give confidence in the structure of our accounting procedures.

7.51 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): This has been one of those rare non-partisan debates in the House of Commons, and I hope that the Government will agree to the proposition advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), which has enjoyed wide support around the Chamber. It would be a milestone if that could be achieved.

The Bill will affect all our constituents. I should like to break with the tradition of the speeches made so far and deliver a constituency speech. I want to describe how the Bill will affect my constituents, and to set out what worries me about it. If some criticism of a certain Department should creep into my remarks, I hope that it will be taken in the spirit that I intend.

By far the largest employer in my constituency is the Ministry of Defence. It employs well over 11,000 people there: about half are scientific or industrial civil servants, and the other half are uniformed members of Her Majesty's forces. The Army's Land Command headquarters is in my constituency. The Land Command—the biggest budget holder in the Army—is responsible for implementing the strategic defence review as it affects the Army. It is also responsible for all Army training and therefore for the management of thousands of acres of training ranges. The Defence Estates organisation is responsible for ensuring that the ranges are usable throughout the year.

The whole of the Salisbury Plain training area, which is run from West Down camp at Tilshead, falls within my constituency. The Royal Regiment of Artillery is based at Larkhill, and its procurement processes cover shells, artillery and transport. The nuclear, biological and chemical defence establishment at Winterbourne Gunner is responsible for all the nuclear, biological and chemical training for all three services. The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency has two crucially important establishments in my area—the defence evaluation and testing organisation at Boscombe Down, and the chemical and biological defence establishment at Porton Down. In addition, there is the Territorial Army base at Old Sarum, with which there is also the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire regiment and B Squadron of the Wiltshire Yeomanry. There is also the large and thriving Sea Cadet branch in Harnham—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman seems well endowed with armed forces in his constituency, but I suggest that that is not what the Bill is all about. He should move on to the Second Reading debate.

Mr. Key: I am grateful for your confirmation that I have succeeded in making my point, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is now three and half years since we had any defence estimates. The 1996 defence estimates were the last to be produced by the Ministry of Defence. Since then, there has been no proper basis for scrutiny by the House of the estimates of the Ministry of Defence. There has been no proper budget scrutiny of any aspect of how that Department spends £22 billion of taxpayers' money.

The Ministry of Defence has had good reason to claim that the manpower needs of producing such estimates are a problem. Not only has it had to cope with the strategic defence review and the comprehensive spending review, but it has also been to war and had problems of overstretch and increased commitments in all three forces to contend with.

The Bill's proposals to introduce resource accounting with five major statements are very welcome. The statement of outturn will show actual outturn against the estimate, while the statement of operating costs will be analogous to the profit and loss report in company accounts. There will be statements about the balance sheet and the cash flow, and there will also be a statement relating costs to objectives. As a consequence of all that, the budget of the Ministry of Defence will increase from £22 billion to £66 billion. That represents a remarkable impact.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend has said something so astonishing that I hope that he will repeat it. Is he really saying that the total budget outturn of the Ministry of Defence will be closer to £66 billion than £22 billion because of depreciation?

Mr. Key: It will be quicker if my hon. Friend waits until I get to that point in my speech. He knows the problems caused by fumbling through papers, and he has the advantage of the Dispatch Box.

In the previous Parliament, the Select Committee on the Treasury reported on the resource accounting principle. It drew the House's attention to the particular problems of the Ministry of Defence. It stated that each Department would have only one parliamentary Vote, whereas the Ministry of Defence at present has four; that Departments would be able to produce shadow or illustrative resource-based expenditure plans from 1998, even though the full system would not be introduced until 2001; that information on what had been achieved with Ministry of Defence spending—that is, the outputs—and how that compared with expectations—that is, the performance—would be available several months earlier each year than the current departmental reports; and that the documents submitted to the House for financial approval should contain plans and targets for what the spending would achieve.

I was a member of the Select Committee on Defence which reported in the 1996-97 Session that we expected to consider the shadow resource budgets in the next Parliament. We recommended that the Ministry of Defence should publish shadow resource-based estimates in 1998 and every year thereafter. Sadly, that is not going to happen. I regret that very much.

When the proposal was first brought to the attention of the House in 1994 by the then Chancellor, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the Ministry of Defence immediately went into overdrive. I want to congratulate all the officials in

that Ministry who have worked so hard over the years. An astonishing number of staff have been through a massive training exercise in accounting to prepare for what is a substantial task. However, it was clear by 1996 that there were huge problems to be tackled. I regret that the shadow departmental resource account for 1998-99 will not be published. That is an error, as publication would have been helpful for everyone.

The Ministry of Defence has another problem, and I hope that the Economic Secretary will offer some help on it. The resource accounting manual states:

"The normal basis of valuation may not be appropriate if a modern substitute is markedly different in its cost, life or output, or where technological advances have resulted in likely replacements having significantly improved quality or quantity of outputs. Under such circumstances, it will be necessary to undertake a 'modern equivalent asset' calculation to arrive at a replacement cost for the asset."

I am not an accountant, but I understand that that is a perfectly acceptable accounting principle. The problem with the assets of the Ministry of Defence is that modern substitutes for many items of equipment have the potential to vary enormously in nature and costs, depending on the defence needs of the country at the time and on the military capabilities of potential aggressors. In other words, a hugely expensive equipment programme costing many billions of pounds may be rendered obsolete.

Eurofighter will be obsolete in 20 or 30 years' time, of course, but it is only a platform for the weapons systems and electronic systems that will be mounted on it. How will all that be accounted for under the new systems? It is clear neither from the Bill nor from the resource accounting manual how such massive changes in the value of assets, which theoretically change the financial viability of the Ministry, should be treated.

There is a huge problem with the valuation of intellectual property rights under the new system. It may be said that the answer is simply the market value of IP rights, but if there is no market value because rights are not for sale, but are secret defence systems obtained on particular terms involving intelligence from the United States, how will intellectual property be valued? How can we value the assets of an establishment such as Porton Down chemical and biological defence?

How do we value deterrence? We have moved away from the cold war, and we must ask from where come the massive new threats facing our country. How can we account for those threats? The defence budget is decreasing. Last week, the French also announced that their defence budget would decrease. Some of the money that the Treasury will regain from defence comes from rationalisation and management of the defence estate, but the Ministry has problems regarding historic buildings or large military bases in the middle of nowhere that have married quarters that could be sold but for the fact that no one wants to live in such remote places. How can we judge their market value? I should be grateful for guidance on that huge problem.

We have had precious little guidance on the sums faced by the Ministry of Defence. In the Ministry's 1997–98 performance report, there were just five lines on resource accounting, under the heading "Project CAPITAL" at paragraph 804. "Modernising Defence", the annual report of defence activity for 1998–99 contains five lines of text, three pie charts, one bar chart and a table. None of it is helpful if one is trying to fathom what is being attempted. However, I can now answer the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset, because that report states:

"From next year, the £22 billion cash budget of the Ministry of Defence will be calculated in a different way, bringing us into line with the best accounting practices of the business world. In preparation for this we have, for the first time, assessed the value of our assets—£66 billion. We will now be able to identify the full (rather than just cash) cost of what we do, a great step forward in helping us to manage our resources more effectively."

The figure of £66 billion is the value of assets, not the increase in defence budget. Would that it were the latter.

The strategic defence review contained five lines of financial text and a pie chart. I thought that the comprehensive spending review would surely let me know what was going on and how the House could scrutinise the Ministry's budget, but it contains even less financial information than the SDR document did.

We should have received a White Paper on defence estimates that would have enabled us to discuss the Bill more satisfactorily. Such a White Paper was promised for last summer. It would still have been three years since the previous one. We were later promised that the White Paper would be produced before Christmas, but it will not be. The traditional two-day defence debate is being slipped into the new year because it cannot be held until the Government have received the report of the Select Committee on Defence on the estimates, which will not be published until early next year. I regret that matters have slipped further and further back.

My final point bears on the accounting that the Bill introduces. Today, the Defence Committee's report on the OCCAR convention was published. OCCAR is the organisation for joint armament co-operation, which was established in November 1996. The acronym stands for the French title, the organisation conjointe de coopération en matière d'armaments, but OCCAR is shorter.

The report points out the difficulty of achieving resource accounting—any accounting—if we stray across joint procurement with other Governments who use completely different systems. The juste retour system has operated previously, meaning a carve-up between the Governments who put money into a project. I am glad that that system is being abandoned, but no satisfactory accounting procedure has been produced under the OCCAR convention that would match the system proposed in the Bill. The Government must address that point.

If we are to move towards having a European aerospace and defence company or joint Government procurement projects—the common new generation frigate system that was recently cancelled is an example of where we are not going—we must ensure proper scrutiny and accountability of extra-territorial systems. There will be more co-operation, and, in defence, that means Government-to-Government deals, rather than deals involving the private sector, but I see no mention in the Bill of such systems of scrutiny.

I am glad to have been able to put those points on a matter that will affect my constituency hugely. All hon. Members could offer similar stories. I support the principle of the Bill, but I hope that the Government will make sensible arrangements that allow us to proceed.

8.6 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): The Chief Secretary to the Treasury set the welcome tone of the debate by his willingness to take interventions from both sides and by his commitment to listen and to enter into dialogue with the Public Accounts Committee and other bodies so that we may work through the perceived criticisms of the Bill as it stands.

Resource-based accountancy and budgeting will bring enormous benefits that will be welcomed by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides. It will ensure that the full economic costs of Government activities are properly measured, improve the way in which capital spending is treated in Government accounts, and explicitly link departmental goals to departmental spending.

However, parts of the Bill have given hon. Members pause for thought. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) spoke eloquently of the need for parallel operation. Part of the process of building towards resource accounting and budgeting has been the trigger points.

Trigger point 2 said that Departments should provide opening balance sheets for the 1999–2000 financial year on a resource basis. That was due to be implemented by June. In July, however, the Treasury did not report that all Departments had met that trigger by providing resource-based opening balance sheets. Instead, it said that all Departments were on track to produce auditable resource accounts for 1999–2000. The clear implication was that trigger point 2 had not been met. Will my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary clarify exactly how many Departments succeeded in preparing resource-based opening balance sheets by June? If she cannot, will she write to me?

Trigger point 3 said that all Departments should prepare dry-run resource accounts for 1998–99 by autumn this year. The Treasury was due to report on progress by the turn of the year, but the Chief Secretary said that he believed that report would be forthcoming in February. As the current Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), pointed out earlier in the debate, the NAO expected 53 dry-run accounts by mid-August, but, by the beginning of November, only 22 had been received. Will the Economic Secretary advise the House how many Departments, at today's date, still have not supplied the NAO with the dry-run accounts that were due earlier this year? If she cannot give us that information this evening, perhaps she could send it to me.

Will the Economic Secretary confirm whether every branch of the Treasury itself has supplied the dry-run resource-based accounts for 1998–99? If, as I believe, there are significant delays, I have two further questions: why has the Treasury not exercised better oversight of Departments in maintaining the timetable that was set, and on what basis does the Treasury request that the House proceed with the introduction of resource-based accounts when we have not had the opportunity to see a draft set of resource-based accounts for every Department against a cash-based set?

The Chairman of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), alluded to the Committee's second report, on resource accounting and budgeting, published in June 1998. The report concluded:

"We are unwilling to give the plans our unqualified approval until we are sure the timetable will allow outstanding problems to be identified and resolved before the new system is introduced. It is important that the Treasury reports progress against the 'trigger points' to Parliament, and that any delay is explained promptly. The decision as to whether the target date for implementation is still viable must not be taken on the basis of information available to the Treasury alone."

Have dry-run resource accounts automatically been made available to the relevant departmental Select Committees, as the Procedure Committee requested?

In his opening remarks, the Chief Secretary said that he continued to regard the triggers as extremely important. Will the Economic Secretary assure us that implementation of resource accounting and budgeting will not occur until all those important trigger points have been met? Will she confirm that the Bill, which contains no mention of trigger points, overrides the commitments given by the Treasury on the series of trigger points? I urge my hon. Friend to adopt the old Latin motto "festina lente" as her guide; let us make haste slowly on this matter, lest we make no progress at all.

The Government want to stop cash-based accounting from April 2001. The Chief Secretary must reassure the House that Departments will be ready to go live at that time. The only way to do that properly will be to have parallel accounts from April 2000. The Bill not only gives the Treasury the power to vary the date of implementation of resource accounting, but, in clause 18, it provides the Treasury with the power to specify different dates for the production of accounts. Those powers should be vested not in the Treasury but in Parliament.

If the Treasury were given such power, it would be equivalent to a company, under the Companies Acts, being able to produce its accounts at any time of the year that it chose—any time that it deemed suitable and found convenient. We would not accept that as a way of regulating companies; we should not accept it as a way of regulating Government affairs. I trust that the Economic Secretary will consider such a clause from the perspective that Labour Members retain from opposition—not simply from the perspective of Government.

Other right hon. and hon. Members have made much of the fact that the Bill honours the letter, but not the principle, of the Exchequer and Audit Departments Acts of 1866 and 1921. I disagree; there has been a fundamental change to the letter of the law. In the 1866 Act, the Comptroller and Auditor General is given a right of access. It says:

"In order that such examination may as far as possible proceed pari passu with the . . . transactions of the several accounting departments, the Comptroller and Auditor General shall have free access, at all convenient times, to the books of account and other documents".

The Bill says not that the CAG "shall have" but that

"A department shall . . . allow . . . access at all reasonable times to any record relating to the department's accounts and"—

a Department shall provide—

"explanations of the department's transactions to the Comptroller on request."

That is the difference between access as a right of the Comptroller and access as an obligation on a Department. To give someone a right to access and to put a Department under an obligation to provide that person with access are very different beasts indeed. The legislation has not merely been updated; the burden of legislation has shifted.

I believe that the Government have no intention of changing the effect of legislation in this matter, but they cannot vouchsafe the same good intentions for future

Governments. Many Members have pointed out that changes in the organisation of government have led to Governments spending money in ways other than simply through Departments. Currently, we have executive agencies, executive non-departmental bodies, national health service bodies, local spending bodies and contractors. They all spend money to which the CAG has no statutory right of access. The Housing Corporation spends £1 billion of public funds each year; English Partnerships spends £250,000 million, and the Environment Agency spends £300 million. There are NHS bodies, housing associations and training and enterprise councils. The private sector prisons contract alone is for £4 billion. The NAO has a statutory right of access to none of those; access must be negotiated through Departments.

It has already been pointed out that the Bill does not change that situation—that is absolutely correct. However, is it right that the Bill does not change the situation? I urge the Government to consider whether this would be a convenient and proper time to introduce right to roam legislation to give the CAG an unfettered right to roam wherever public money is being spent—to give him the right to pursue and to scrutinise those funds wherever they are spent and by whom. By extending the scope of the Bill in that way, the Government would reduce problems for themselves in the future. I remind the Economic Secretary that, for every new executive non-departmental body set up since May 1997—from the Commission for Health Improvement and the Competition Commission to the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts and the eight Regional Development Agencies—the Government have asked the CAG to be the auditor and have laid the accounts before the House of Commons. The Government's practice has, therefore, been absolutely unimpeachable. However, Labour Members ask the Government to set in statute what they already grant in practice and what we commend them for.

I remind the House that, on occasions, the Comptroller and Auditor General has not had such access to bodies set up by the previous Administration. When it came to investigating the national lottery, the Government and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport said that access should be provided. However, Camelot and its private auditors refused to provide that access. Fortunately, the National Lottery Act 1998 was before the House at that time and it was possible to incorporate into it a provision to give the Comptroller and Auditor General access to the national lottery. Such a convenient and easy remedy will not always be before the House to provide the Comptroller and Auditor General with access to any organisation to which he does not have a statutory right of access. Given the enormous sums of public money that are spent through such organisations, it is vital that the Comptroller and Auditor General should have such access.

Mr. Sheldon: My hon. Friend refers to a most important matter. The regulator of the national lottery gave the contract to Camelot after one its directors had given certain advantages to the regulator himself. That was a major scandal, and it was only because the National Audit Office was able to investigate that we knew about it.

Mr. Gardiner: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for those remarks, which have clarified the point that I was trying to make. I am a relatively new Member and it is always difficult to know quite how to approach one's colleagues on the Front Bench when one believes that they could improve a Bill. To do that with the support of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne is, I trust, one way of approaching them with impunity.

I was disappointed when I read the Opposition amendment; I thought that it was disgraceful. This subject has been handled quite properly through the Select Committee procedure of the House and by discussions between the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee and Ministers. The Government have shown their openness and their willingness to engage in dialogue on these important matters, but the Opposition amendment sought to make cheap party political capital. Therefore, I was delighted when the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) agreed not to press the amendment to a Division on condition that a Special Standing Committee is set up. Such an approach is far more in keeping with the way in which the House has sought to tackle this subject and with the great consensus that has been apparent on both sides of the House.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary for the tone that he set for the debate, which has been one of dialogue and openness to the points that have been made and that will continue to be made. I hope that, in Committee, we can achieve progress on the Bill, because it is fundamentally important. The Gladstonian principle, which was set in 1866 to allow the Comptroller and Auditor General the right to follow public funds wherever they go, is one that the House should hold dear and cling on to.

8.25 pm

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): I agree with much, if not all, of what the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) said. He and I heard the same briefing in the Public Accounts Committee last week and I shall voice some of the concerns that he has already expressed. However, it has become increasingly clear from this thoroughly interesting debate that the Bill is half-baked and that right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the House seem to have come to that conclusion.

The Bill is unlikely to attract popular media attention if for no other reason than its dry-as-dust title. Government resources and accounts is not a subject likely to pack the House. Nevertheless, it is fundamentally important to the machinery of government as we have seen from the quality of the contributions that have already been made. The Bill will change the basis on which Parliament funds Whitehall and the way in which the users of the funds then account for their performance. I intend to spend a few minutes enthusing about the principle of resource accounting before discussing what I and others see as flaws in the Bill. I am deeply encouraged by the offer made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) about how the Bill should proceed after this debate.

After years of prodding and cajoling by the City and industry, as well as by those Members from both sides who have experience of the commercial world, the business of government is at last switching from cash accounting to resource accounting. It is not so long ago that Departments were unable to distinguish between capital account and current account expenditure.

[Mr. Charles Wardle]

Now they will enter the next century with profit and loss—or, at any rate, income and expenditure—statements, balance sheets, depreciation and cash-flow analysis. They will be able, if they mean business, to define their operational plans in terms of budgetary projections against which they will be able to measure their own performance by means of management accounts that will highlight favourable or adverse variances against the budgets that they have agreed and to which they are committed.

Performance-related pay will emerge from the shadows as a realistic incentive because performance will be measurable. Better still, the preparations of plans and budgets and management accounts will enable senior officials, if they so choose, to assign measurable targets, goals and objectives down the management line to individual middle-ranking civil servants who will have an opportunity to own the tasks delegated to them and to see for themselves the results of their efforts.

For years, the best-run private sector businesses have empowered middle management within their organisation with real responsibility and an awareness of their employees' contribution to the larger enterprise. Resource accounting should open the same door to junior grades of the civil service, who have hitherto worked loyally and conscientiously but without any means of measuring and accounting for their own efforts.

If all that works as it should, I predict that Whitehall management will discover a new flexibility and informality, and whole tiers of high-ranking officials may find it increasingly difficult to justify their old-style roles. Mandarins who have demanded, and got, salaries comparable with those paid by moderately successful private sector companies will find that the competition for top jobs hots up as more company executives are head-hunted into a public service where the business systems will no longer be regarded as quaint and incompatible.

The scope for public-private partnership enterprise should become much more meaningful because the City will be able to assess and review, on a basis comparable with the private sector, the accounts and financial track record of those parts of the public sector being injected into such partnerships.

There is little doubt that the whole process of privatisation over the past 10 or 15 years would have delivered higher proceeds for the taxpayer if the public sector businesses being sold had regularly produced their accounts on an accruals basis before privatisation, because that would have given institutional investors a clearer idea of what they were bidding for. Equally, it must be said that without the impetus of privatisation, Whitehall would probably still be resisting resource accounting.

A better-run Whitehall is, at least, the theory of the changes presaged by the Bill, which could and should deliver better standards of management performance. That is why I have been an enthusiastic supporter of the switch to resource accounting, but there are already a number of danger signals concerning the Bill which have been touched on in today's debate and which the House simply cannot ignore.

I shall focus briefly on just three of those dangers. The first is that the pace at which resource accounting has developed means that Whitehall is already in peril of trying to run before it can walk. It is only in the past couple of years that Departments, most of which have precious little in-house accounting and information technology skills, have begun to grapple with the changeover from cash accounting to a resource-based system.

It is therefore essential that Parliament is given clear evidence that resource accounting is adequately tested and up and running in Whitehall before the Bill takes effect, as several right hon. and hon. Members have said. That is crucial because the Bill repeals the existing audit powers that flow from the Exchequer and Audit Departments Acts of 1866 and 1921. Since the statutory authority for the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the function performed by the Public Accounts Committee on Parliament's behalf will in future be contained in the new legislation, it would be disastrous if resource accounting were not working smoothly by the time that the Bill reached the statute book.

As the House has been told, two and a half years ago, the Treasury gave the Public Accounts Committee a specific assurance that the date for the changeover in accounting systems would be decided in the light of progress, which would be judged against a number of yardsticks. The Treasury gave a clear undertaking that the two systems would be run side by side to ensure that the changeover went according to plan.

If, however, the transfer is not done efficiently, and the Treasury persists with its intention to discard the old cash system by April 2001, there will be a risk that Parliament will be unable to hold the Executive accountable for the money that they have been voted. As it stands, the Treasury is saying about the Bill, "Trust us. We'll get it right." One has only to recall the plans and promises made over the past decade in advance of new IT systems installation in Whitehall, which subsequently came to grief, to appreciate that we shall all have to keep our fingers crossed and hope that the Treasury is up to the task.

The second danger concerns the missed opportunity or, dare I say, plain refusal by the Treasury, to take advantage of the first major public accounts legislation since 1983 to extend the scope and powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General. If anything, the Bill is more restrictive of the CAG's audit powers. It does not put right the glaring anomaly whereby the CAG is at present unable to follow the audit path of public funds made over to new forms of service providers such as private companies working under contract to the Government, or voluntary bodies that are allocated large sums of taxpayers' money to carry out programmes approved by Government.

Dr. Palmer: The hon. Gentleman is going even further than previous speakers in seeking to include voluntary bodies in the Bill. Is he suggesting that anyone who receives a lottery grant should suddenly be subject to investigation by the National Audit Office?

Mr. Wardle: No, that is not what I am suggesting, but where there is a contract between the Government and another body which involves taxpayers' money, the audit path should be clear and unfettered, and the CAG should be able to proceed, as the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) have said.

As we have heard, there is no provision for the CAG to be the auditor of all non-departmental public bodies, as he should be, or of limited companies set up by central Government bodies.

Most controversially, the Bill provides for large-scale financial assistance to be made available to the body to be established to carry on public-private partnerships, without giving the CAG access of his own to that body for audit purposes. Yet it is to the Comptroller and Auditor General that Parliament turns, via the Public Accounts Committee, for accountability of the public funds for which it has voted.

The Bill makes no provision for the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit the operational performance measures that Government Departments will be encouraged to publish, once they have become sufficiently familiar with resource accounting. In that respect, the Bill as it stands is a wasted opportunity. I hope that the Government will consider making suitable amendments in Committee, and that appropriate gestures will be made when the Economic Secretary winds up the debate. If that is not done, it will be difficult to avoid the conclusion that Whitehall is trying to fence out the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office, possibly because they have become too effective at uncovering the management shortcomings of some Departments. That is a cynical view, but one is tempted to draw such a conclusion.

The third and final danger is the Bill being pushed through without adequate consultation. We must gather the views of as many seasoned financial experts as possible. No doubt, the chief accountancy adviser to the Treasury has had his say, but there appears to have been insufficient dialogue with the Comptroller and Auditor General. Moreover, it is, to say the least, careless of the Government business managers to have scheduled Second Reading of this Bill on a day that the Public Accounts Committee has been sitting.

The Acts of 1866, 1921 and 1983 were all the subject of close prior consultation with the Public Accounts Committee, at a time when that was by no means the norm in respect of other legislation. Yet, at a time when the Government make a virtue of carrying out wider pre-legislative scrutiny and using special Standing Committees, the Treasury appears to be cocking a snook at the Public Accounts Committee—inadvertently, I am sure—and at Parliament.

Unless attitudes change and the Minister decides to send the Bill to a special Standing Committee, it will be difficult not to conclude that, having been dragged into the 20th century just before that century passes into history, Whitehall is determined not to endure the scrutiny that the proposed accounting changes will allow. That would make a mockery both of the Bill and of the accountability of Government to Parliament.

8.37 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): I apologise for having missed the beginning of the debate. Most unusually, the Select Committee on the Treasury sat this afternoon, and I had to attend that sitting.

It is something of an exaggeration to say that, in the pubs and clubs of Stafford, people speak of little else but resource accounting and budgeting. However, I am sure that they will be as impressed as I am if this great project is brought in on time, for 2001-02. It is a mammoth task and its being achieved on time will reflect creditably on Parliament, on the Conservative Government that set us on this path, and on the current Government.

I have listened to the pointed questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) about the Treasury accounting for the performance of Departments against the trigger points so far. I shall be interested to hear the Economic Secretary's responses to those questions.

The shift from cash-based to accrual-based accounting requires legislation to amend Acts dating from 1866 onwards. We are witnessing a thorough reform of public finances when the resource accounting and budgeting process is seen alongside the new economic and fiscal strategy framework, the new three-year rolling settlements for public services spending, the separation of capital expenditure from revenue expenditure, and the two rules for capital investment: the golden rule and the sustainable investment rule.

I ask myself, to what end are all those changes being made? The first permissible aim for which we should be aiming is a clearer understanding of public finances—clearer for parliamentarians, for potential partners and for the public at large. The second permissible aim is to improve the performance of "UK plc", especially in the sphere of capital investment. I shall concentrate on two aspects: first, the public process of scrutiny, budgeting and accounting; and, secondly, the effect of the reforms on capital investment.

As for the public process, I have found useful the Treasury's guide of April 1999, entitled "Resource Accounting and Budgeting. A Short Guide to the Financial Reforms". It suggests that the two great benefits from the process are, first, to improve transparency, making it easier for taxpayers to see what they are getting for their money and, secondly, helping us to improve the process of deciding where to allocate resources to achieve the best results.

The system of Parliament supplying money to the Government to spend has never been set down in statute. It relies instead on established usage. The Bill sets out no proposals to make any change to that system. In effect, Parliament decides the procedure by which we grant supply and the Treasury decides the definitions and form of that supply.

Parliament wants very much to retain annual accountability for the resources voted by it to the Government, so it is suggested under resource accounting and budgeting that the first content of the Government's departmental accounts will be a summary of the resource outturn. This will include what remains effectively of the cash requirement from past voting procedures for supply, called now the financial requirement. That is the equivalent of the cash requirement plus the borrowing permissions. That much we will remain familiar with, but because of the change to accrual-based accounting for everything else it will take some time for us as parliamentarians to follow the change from the one system to the other.

Perhaps we shall be more familiar with the second, third and fourth parts of the content of the new accounts. First, the operating cost statement will look like a profit and loss account. Secondly, the balance sheet will speak for itself. Thirdly, there will be the cash flow forecast.

[Mr. David Kidney]

These will look very much like the information that is provided in the private sector. That feeling is enhanced by the fact that the resource accounting manual will apply wherever applicable to generally accepted accounting practice, which is the same in private practice. The Comptroller and Auditor General's certificate will give a true and fair view of the accounts, which is the same standard as that which applies to private sector auditors.

The fifth content of the new accounts will be a statement of resources by departmental objectives. The explanatory notes in the Bill call this a statement relating costs to objectives. The idea is that Departments will match resources to meeting objectives as expressed in their output and performance analyses. These analyses are something new. There were draft ones last year and they will be finalised next year. Then along came the comprehensive spending review with public service agreements. There is a great source of misunderstanding one from the other. It is reassuring that the Treasury guide of April 1999 states:

"The output and performance analysis will also be consistent with, and complement, departmental public service agreements."

That is a welcome statement for the future development of two slightly different statements of the same thing.

As for the avalanche of information coming our way, the same Treasury guide states:

"This demonstrates the significant increase in the amount of information in Resource Accounts compared with Appropriation Accounts."

It is true that there will be much more information, but I return to the point that it will still be difficult for us to wrestle with the changes and what I would call the shifting sands. It will involve keeping an eye on resource accounting and remembering the financial requirements that we are voting for each year.

We shall also be treated to departmental investment strategies, departmental plans in the spring and departmental reports in the autumn. Despite all the additional information, I would like to echo the concerns that some hon. Members have mentioned about the way in which the important output and performance analyses seem to be detached from the rest of the statements which will be properly audited and accounted for.

On capital investment, the Chancellor has already made welcome changes by separating capital expenditure from revenue expenditure. That protects necessary long-term investment in our infrastructure from short-term pressures on the revenue side. He has also reversed the long-term decline in investment in the country's infrastructure. All that is to the good, even before we come to resource accounting and budgeting.

Clear accounting, like resource accounting and budgeting, is welcome, but does not in itself cause any more investment to be made in infrastructure; policy decisions do that. In my view—I may be echoing an earlier plea from my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell)—we still need much more capital investment in our infrastructure. I accept that that investment ought to be subject to clear objectives and clear investment appraisal criteria, but the need still exists, as we see every day in our work.

I welcome public-private partnerships in bringing more private sector investment in our infrastructure, but public sector investment is needed at a faster pace. In local authority housing, for example, welcome though the capital receipts initiative has been in allowing councils to invest in the upgrading of their existing housing stock, there is still an urgent need for more social housing. Local government needs more than the one option that it has at present for raising finance—large-scale voluntary transfers of existing housing stock.

On Partnerships UK, the proposed successor to the Treasury taskforce, it is important to remind ourselves that in its two years of existence, the taskforce has been extremely successful. The number of NHS projects has risen from none in May 1997 to 37 major schemes now. Investment attracted into our infrastructure has risen from virtually nil in May 1997 to more than £4 billion now. The Treasury taskforce was established for a limited lifespan of two years, and its two years are up.

The proposal for Partnerships UK arises out of the second Bates review of the private finance initiative. There is welcome news in the second review for those Labour sceptics who are not sure about the efficacy of PFI schemes. Bates has led the way in reducing the complexity of PFI contracts and therefore in reducing consultancy costs, and has clarified the use of public sector comparators, so that we can decide which contract ought to attract purely public sector investment, which some still do.

The Bates review explains the need for protecting the pensions of employees who transfer under TUPE—the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981—and the second review has gone so far as to explain that there is not even a requirement that staff who go with the contract must transfer from their present employers to the new contractor's employment. Those are great benefits from the second Bates review.

Partnerships UK should continue to build up the body of expertise that the taskforce started to amass. It ought to be able to produce more standardised formats for the contracts for private investment, and tackle politically sensitive big contracts and those that are creating replicable models.

Concern has been expressed about a possible conflict of interest because of the additional power of Partnerships UK to take an equity stake in the contracts that it promotes. The reason for the conflict of interest is that PUK will be advising a Government Department how to get the best deal for the contract, and also potentially taking an equity share in that contract's benefits. That is one possible criticism of the set-up of Partnerships UK. The reverse of that coin is the danger of cherry picking if Partnerships UK accepts the easiest contracts, which would have attracted private finance anyway. It would thus risk not fulfilling its brief.

A Library research paper on the Bill explains the way in which Partnerships UK can avoid a conflict of interest. However, it might be best if it concentrates initially on its advice role and on getting contracts to succeed, and leaves the investment role to the private sector when possible.

The Bill is a modernising, if not earth-shattering measure. Taken with other reforms, it will make public finances more understandable. Clear accounting procedures are desirable, but, in themselves, they do not provide better services, better value for money or more capital investment in our infrastructure. Quality policy making and scrutiny are required to secure those objectives. Those are the challenges for the Government and for Parliament.

8.51 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution to the debate. Debates on such subjects tend to attract specialists: members of Select Committees, including the Public Accounts Committee, and people with banking or accountancy experience. I claim no such expertise. My interest in the Bill derives from the specific references to the national health service in clauses 12 and 13. I want to ask one or two simple questions about the way in which the Bill will treat the Department of Health and the NHS.

I understand the desire for greater openness, authenticity and transparency in public accounts, and especially the importance of having a sense of the way in which we consume the capital that is used in providing public services. That is a laudable objective, and I note the consensus on it. However, we must consider whether the Bill will achieve that objective. There is a danger that the large measure of discretion that the Bill grants the Treasury will create a mere illusion of greater openness, which could lead to a sense of false security.

The reaction of Departments and parliamentary draftsmen to difficult or seemingly intractable problems is often to grant themselves unfettered discretion. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), whose return to the Chamber is timely, mentioned unfunded state pension liabilities and their exclusion from the Bill. That exclusion highlights the problem of trying to examine the public sector and Government activity as parallel to that of the private sector. The unfunded obligations of the state for future state pensions are unquantifiable because the state reserves, as many pensioners would say that they know to their cost, the right to change its obligations unilaterally and without notice. It would be problematic to quantify those liabilities. That underlines the nature of the state as a contracting party and highlights one of the difficulties of trying to view the state's liabilities as parallel to those of the private sector.

A major point of having standard and codified accounting practices is to allow continuity and also comparability, both between different systems and across different periods. People who use accounts in the real world will readily acknowledge that that is one of the most important uses to which they put them. I suggest that the discretion that the Treasury will have under the current proposals will undermine the core—the very point—of the exercise. Another important point of producing accounts in a standard and recognisable form is to have clear sight of the assets that are employed and measure their effective use and consumption—the consumption of capital.

I am not unmindful of the mood of consensus surrounding the debate, but I feel obliged to say that, since May 1997, we have seen a consistent and deplorable manipulation of figures and the presentation of public accounts. The most notorious example is the misclassification of the working families tax credit as a negative tax with flagrant disregard for the Office for National Statistics and all international conventions.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): The hon. Gentleman seems to be arguing the case as outlined in the Opposition amendment, but does he accept that the Government's introduction of resource accounting is consistent with generally accepted accounting practices and that they have set up the independent Financial Reporting Advisory Board in order that what he is suggesting will not happen?

Mr. Hammond: As my hon. Friends have said from the Front Bench, we welcome the principles involved and if we were convinced that what the hon. Gentleman has referred to would be achieved by them we would be very happy indeed. However, the large degree of discretion that the Treasury is retaining for itself gives us cause to doubt that that will be the case.

On the basis of our experience over the past two and a half years, we have little reason to accept that transparency is the Government's principal objective. The explanatory notes that have been made available with the Bill say that its purpose is to take the focus away from cash and on to resources, but Government announcements, particularly since the completion of the comprehensive spending review, have wilfully and deliberately focused on large sums of cash. They were presented in an extremely misleading way and, on some occasions, there was double or triple counting, which enabled them to magnify in the public eye the significance of what they intended to deliver in terms of public spending. I suggest that they exploited the ignorance of the vast majority of us, who do not understand the complexities of accounting and high finance, and after the comprehensive spending review announcements the early indications were that most of the serious press had been effectively deceived.

My hon. Friends have said that, on the basis of what is in the Bill and the resource accounting manual, large and important assets, liabilities and activities are to be excluded from this initiative. I intend to focus for a few moments on the Department of Health and how the Bill will affect the role of the national health service in departmental and whole of Government accounts. Obviously, we are considering only a framework and we have to work from the latest version of the resource accounting manual, which tells us that Department of Health accounts will broadly be drawn up on the basis that the purchasers in the NHS will be included within the resource accounting boundary, but the providers will be excluded. That analysis is slightly too simplistic, because clause 12 tells us that health authorities, primary care trusts and special health authorities will be included within the boundary.

Primary care trusts are both providers and purchasers, and special health authorities are providers of services. It is clear, however, that national health service trusts—the 430 or so bodies that hold and operate hospitals throughout the country—will be beyond the resource accounting boundary. Thus, by what the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) described as "an accident of restructuring", the biggest holders of assets and the biggest spenders in the national health service will be excluded.

I ask myself whether there has been a genuine decision to exclude bodies that operate at arm's length from the Secretary of State, but that is not the case. The Secretary of State has and uses considerable powers to direct national health service trusts, and the tendency in recent years has been to centralise that power and to bring those trusts increasingly under central direction from Whitehall.

It could be that there were technical problems in bringing NHS trusts within the scope of resource accounting. I understand that there are genuine technical

[Mr. Hammond]

problems in the education sector in relation to schools. The hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) expressed the concern that the best might become the enemy of the good. That is not the case with NHS trusts, because they produce accounts using standard accounting procedures. They are even aggregated in a document. I am not sure whether they are consolidated in the technical sense of the word, but they are certainly all available in aggregated form. As an outsider on the financial technicalities of the debate, I believe that those accounts could relatively easily be incorporated into the Government's proposals.

I wonder whether the politics of this is that the Government like to announce revenue and capital spending by Ministers—sometimes two, three or four times—but are less keen to accept that the outturn of those announcements is a direct part of the departmental responsibility for which the Secretary of State for Health answers. By this "accident of restructuring", a significant part of the activity of a major spending Department is to be beyond the boundary of departmental resource accounting and budgeting. That is an incoherent and unjustifiable split of the Department's responsibilities, and an artificial divide that the Government can easily, and should, avoid.

This matter is of great importance. There are 430 or so national health service trusts with a total spending of about £20 billion, and they hold assets in excess of £20 billion. I am afraid to say that not all those assets are effectively utilised. In 1991, capital charges were introduced into the NHS with the intention of increasing awareness at trust level of the cost of holding assets, especially estate assets. The available evidence to date is that that has not been a particularly effective tool, and there is a strong argument for a greater focus on the assets held within the NHS at national level. I focus my remarks on land and buildings, but I would not like to give the impression that no other classes of assets in the NHS are under-utilised.

I suggest to the Minister that part of the problem is the concept of ownership. The body on whose balance sheet the asset sits will pay a capital charge. It is often, for historic reasons, a small sum in relation to the current value of the asset. That body will often not stand to gain the benefit of a disposal of that asset. Whereas a private sector holder of an asset will seek to earn a return on it or dispose of it, that is not always the case in the national health service.

The NHS is Europe's largest landowner, holding some £23 billion-worth of land and building assets. Anything that we can do to focus on the effective use of those assets and to concentrate on the way in which they are used would be greatly to the benefit of the NHS and the nation as a whole.

I consider it inconsistent and incoherent, in terms of what the Government say they are trying to do, to exclude the provider side of the national health service entirely. There is no good reason for that in principle, and no good reason in practice, as the information is already available in a form that the Government could use. I hope that the Economic Secretary will tell us that she will consider including the entire NHS in resource accounting from the outset, in order to give genuine coherence to what the Government seek to do for the NHS and the Department of Health's resource-based accounts.

9.6 pm

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): In this era of cross-party co-operation, and—who knows—even coalition, it is quite pertinent that we should study the heritage of the Gladstone Government, a Liberal Government whom some would remember as being particularly prominent.

Although the debate has been interesting, at times I have had the impression that non-members of the relevant Select Committees could speak only on sufferance. I am grateful for the offer of education from my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), but I shall attempt to speak immediately, as best I can.

The Bill breaks effective new ground in three important ways. As many have pointed out, one relates to capital spending. I think that we all agree that, in that regard, the change is altogether an improvement, as the effect of the current rules has been to depress public spending. As the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) illustrated, giving the example of the water industry, if spending must be concentrated on one year, there is never a good year in which to do it.

There is, perhaps, a technical issue here. If we enter a transitional phase, during that phase we may produce a spurious impression of falling investment, because the existing investments have been written off and the new ones will be spread over a number of years. That, however, should not deter us. The prospect of whole of Government accounts is equally welcome to all of us who have worked in the private sector, and we look forward to a similar overview of Government activity.

Although Partnerships UK seems to be a useful initiative, I hope that the Economic Secretary will tell us whether she is confident that the new body will be given adequate support in all regions. I note that my region, the east midlands, benefits far the least from PFI contracts, notwithstanding two major projects in the Nottingham area—the Nottingham tram system and the Queen's medical centre extension.

One issue has not been raised so far—I realise that it is linked to traditional accounting theory. The opportunity has not been taken to change the tradition whereby each year's spending is strictly cash-limited, and any money left over at the end of the year must be returned to the Treasury. That is a practice that we have all encountered in the context of our parliamentary office allowances, and that most of us have encountered in either public or private industry. We all know that it results either in underspending, if the budget is not spent by the end of the year—we see that all over Government—or in wasteful spending, following a panicky dash to get rid of the money before it goes away. I hope that the Government will consider whether improvements can be made.

The main issue that has attracted controversy today is that of direct access by the National Audit Office to a company receiving public funding or working intimately with the Government—or, indeed, any body set up by the Government that is essentially a public body. Several hon. Members have made a distinction between the ability to access those bodies and the ability to get information about them, as set out in clause 11(5). It may be helpful to hon. Members to note that clause 11(5) contains a misprint; the reference should be to clause 10(6)(b).

As I have said in interventions, the danger in pressing for full direct access is that we will subject those bodies, not all of which are administration rich, to double

jeopardy in audits—in fact, in certain circumstances, to a full double audit. That is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by local government, which, as we know, is extremely stretched. It is already subject to the Audit Commission. The proposal is that it should also, in principle, be subject to a partial, or even a full revised audit by the NAO, if it saw fit.

Various possible scenarios have been advanced. My right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West gave some examples. One was of an effective second audit that spotted omissions in the first. It is clear that, every time we do a second audit, we will sometimes spot things that were not spotted the first time round, but we would not necessarily suggest that as a normal process.

Mr. Sheldon: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Audit Commission and the NAO work together extremely well and take each other's words for the results of their audits, so the problem that he brings up is not likely to arise.

Dr. Palmer: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention. That covers a wide area of the bodies. If the Audit Commission is essentially considered an extended arm of the NAO, that will lighten the burden. However, that is not invariably the case.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West referred to a case where the NAO had spotted an illicit embrace in the front office of a chief executive. I agree that that was happy serendipity, but it was not due to any particular skill on the part of the NAO.

My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) said that further education councils could be looked at, and that the investigation might lead to a specific college, or to a specific supplier working with the college. Again, I understand the reasoning, but, in principle, it would mean that every body that entered a serious relationship with the public sector would be subject to further intervention. That was expressed most clearly by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner), who suggested that the NAO should have a right to roam, which we could perhaps also call a right to fish.

How often would that happen in practice? It could be done frequently. If it is, we should take the example of the Government since the general election and make the NAO the auditor for the body concerned. Where we think that the NAO will often have questions, why not make it the auditor? I encourage the Economic Secretary to say that, as other bodies' audit arrangements come up for review, the Government will look favourably at whether the NAO might be the most appropriate body. In particular, all hon. Members who have spoken would welcome it if Partnerships UK were specifically brought under the NAO's wing.

The relationship can be more tenuous. The example was given of a company that organises bakery operations for a public body. I think that we would agree that the NAO would study the operation of that bakery infrequently. One might reasonably, then, rely on clause 11(5), which enables the NAO to demand information from whoever is acting as auditor for that body. I think that, to some extent, we should allow the Government to act with some pragmatism in establishing the National Audit Office, when appropriate, as the relevant body.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) effectively suggested kicking the proposals into touch, for examination by a Special Standing Committee. In some circumstances, such examination would be very beneficial. In this case, however, it seems that the issues are fairly clear, and have been fairly well illuminated in this debate. I therefore urge continuation of the process, with the normal Committee, so that we might conclude on time and without further delay in passing an important Bill.

9.15 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I generally welcome the Bill, which has some good aspects. The new form of accounting for public expenditure introduced by the Bill will undoubtedly give more information to hon. Members, and therefore more and better general control over Government spending. However, I am perhaps a bit more cynical than some hon. Members, as I suspect that the Government are introducing the new form of accounting because it will give them, rather than Parliament, more information and control. Nevertheless, the development is welcome and will give us extra information that we need.

I welcome the Bill also because it will introduce for the first time proper capital accounting. I—like many hon. Members—was once in local government, and it has always struck me as extraordinary that central Government capital and revenue expenditure were accounted for in exactly the same way, all mixed up in one pot, whereas, in local government, capital and revenue expenditure were differentiated, and the real value of capital expenditure compared with revenue expenditure becomes much more obvious to everyone concerned.

One of the possible interesting spin-offs of the new form of accounting is that, by showing everyone the real value of long-term capital investment, it may make the private finance initiative rather less attractive than it has been to date. I do not think that that point had been mentioned so far in the debate.

The real value of the new form of accounting will be to give everyone better control of expenditure. Nevertheless, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) said, I hope that the Government will also see fit to ensure that we shall be able to use that extra information and control by providing, when necessary, training for hon. Members. One of the extraordinary aspects of this place is that, although many of us are elected without any real experience of audit, accounts or business, without relevant training, we are expected to try—in Select Committees and other forums—to control and monitor Government expenditure. I hope that Ministers will take on board my hon. Friend's point on that matter.

What is wrong with the Bill? As hon. Members on both sides of the House have said time and again today, our main concern is the lack of power provided in the Bill for the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office over expenditure in some spheres of Government accounts. I hope that hon. Members, by repeatedly hammering home that concern, have finally made the point to Ministers—if we had not already done so—that we really are concerned about the issue, which they really have to address quickly.

Every organisation needs an audit office and some type of external audit function to help it control its expenditure, and the Government need one perhaps more than anyone.

[Mr. David Rendel]

I was once an internal auditor for Esso Petroleum. This year, on joining the Public Accounts Committee, I was staggered when I discovered that, in contravention of the basic principle of audit, the National Audit Office did not have full access to all Government expenditure whenever it wanted such access. It is quite extraordinary that, over the years, hon. Members have allowed a system to grow that does not allow our auditor to have full access to all Government expenditure.

I should have liked to have time to make various other points—particularly on Partnerships UK, although the important issue of the possible conflict of interest has already been raised. It is perhaps worth considering one brief example of what might have happened if Partnerships UK had been in charge, for example, of the contract to write a new national insurance recording system.

There were already many problems with writing a new system. If the whole project had been done at rather greater arm's length, with a body intervening between Parliament and the body writing the system, it would have been much harder for us to detect problems with the system and to report them to Parliament. The dangers of the NAO not having full access to all aspects of public accounts are clear, and should be clear to every hon. Member.

The Chief Secretary started the debate by saying that the Bill was not supposed to overhaul the whole audit process. I accept that that was not his original intention. Nevertheless, it must be an opportunity to bring back under the auspices of the Comptroller and Auditor General some aspects of Government expenditure which currently are not in his remit. We should be taking this opportunity to make sure that the powers of the CAG are extended as far as possible.

Even if this Bill cannot now be changed—and even if the Government are unwilling to guarantee tonight that it will be changed to give full access to the CAG in future—I hope that the Economic Secretary will accept the principle that the CAG should in future have access to all Government expenditure whenever he wants it.

9.21 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): This has been an important and valuable debate—essentially more parliamentary than party political. We hope that our proposal not to vote against the Bill and to see a Special Standing Committee investigate issues raised on both sides of the House will be accepted by the Government, as everyone saw that it was made spontaneously.

Gladstone has been much cited. He would be turning in his grave if he were here and realised the extent to which his intentions for full accountability for Government expenditure to Parliament had gone off the rails. No one is objecting to resource accounting. Indeed, it is amazing that we are at the end of the 20th century and the Government still have cash accounts. Perhaps that is a comment on our processes, and on some of the things that are wrong with this country.

There is consensus that the Bill needs changing. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) referred to it as half-baked. I would have said simply that Sir Humphrey had had a heavy hand in the drafting of the Bill. There has been consensus that there is a problem, in that the NAO and the Comptroller and Auditor General cannot follow public money wherever it goes. Under the Bill, the CAG will not be certifying the regularity of accounts. He will be merely certifying that expenditure has been spent—not how it has been spent.

On the PFI and Partnerships UK proposals, I congratulate the Treasury taskforce, which has done an excellent job in accelerating the number of PFI deals. The taskforce appears to have cut through a lot of the bureaucratic problems that stood in the way in the past. The proposals for Partnerships UK are, in essence, to say that a talented and skilled team should be put into a majority private sector-owned body and paid commercial salaries. I have grave reservations about whether that will work.

It seems that the taskforce is doing essentially a public sector job. I suggest that it might be better to have a permanent taskforce whose members are paid private sector salaries within the Treasury. There is no real reason why that is not do-able. I note that the CAG staff earn private sector salaries.

How is the £1 billion balance sheet going to arise? Ministers have said that they expect one third of PFI projects to be handled under this scheme. Partnerships UK is to put up seedcorn money to local authority projects to finance feasibility studies. It will become impossible to avoid getting caught up in financing syndicates, or even in organising the syndicates that tender for sub-contracted contracts.

If that happens, there will be an impossible conflict of interests, with a private sector body having privileged access to public sector business. The industry is concerned and the Government have not said as clearly as they might what Partnerships UK's territory will be.

Mr. Love: Is it not appropriate that the body that deals with public-private partnerships should itself be a public-private partnership?

Mr. Flight: With respect, the hon. Gentleman misunderstands its role. The Treasury taskforce has been effective in sorting out the public side of the proposals and then going to the marketplace for people to put together the syndicates, make tenders and find the finance. It has a specific role, working with the Departments, local authorities—if relevant—and the Treasury. One of my concerns is that the team will lose the good will of the Treasury and the Departments when it moves to the private sector.

We certainly do not object in any way to resource accounting—we started it—but there are considerable problems and a lot is missing. Hospitals, schools, roads and defence are excluded on the assets side, and pension and PFI liabilities on the liabilities side. Nothing in the Bill clarifies definitions to make it a little easier for the citizen to understand what is going on.

Key clauses clearly give the Treasury the power to define whatever it sees fit and produce accounts as it sees fit. There is no independent body to verify that accounts are true and fair. The Bill is a triumph of presentation over substance in that area, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) for his contribution. He spoke with many years' experience of the fundamental

issues and was the first to assert the relevance today of the principles of Gladstonian parliamentary accountability. He made the point that Parliament has less rights than the European Court of Auditors to scrutinise expenditure and that less than half of non-departmental expenditure of Government moneys is scrutinised by the Comptroller and Auditor General. He pointed out the fact that there is no provision in the Bill for the Housing Corporation or the Environment Agency.

Dr. Palmer: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that as long as those various areas are not included, resource accounting should not be introduced?

Mr. Flight: Others have given the answer. The Bill as it stands raises a host of issues that it would be better for the Public Accounts Committee to consider before legislation is rushed through. If it is deemed appropriate to start with certain areas, the Bill itself should make it clear to which areas it is intended to extend the provisions and should address the issue of providing proper parliamentary accountability in relation to all expenditure.

Perhaps the major speech was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who pointed out that at its heart the Bill is about the constitutional relationship between Parliament and Whitehall and that the proper process is for Departments to supply proper accounting to Parliament and for the Public Accounts Committee to scrutinise that accounting.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden also pointed out that the Public Accounts Committee had not been consulted on the legislation and that it meddled with some sound aspects of the current procedures for parliamentary accountability, as well as locking in place some of its weaker aspects. He also appeared to offer, on behalf of the PAC, to take evidence from Treasury Ministers about their intent and to provide a method for scrutinising the proposed legislation. My right hon. Friend also made the important point that no EU problems were associated with extending the powers of the Auditor General and the NAO to cover all areas of Government expenditure.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Does the hon. Gentleman believe that it would be worth delaying resource accounting, and all its benefits, for years so that we could provide a broader remit for the Comptroller and Auditor General, or does he accept that it is better to move forward and consider later, bit by bit, the brief for the NAO?

Mr. Flight: With respect, that question has already been answered. The Opposition have offered the sensible proposal of a Special Standing Committee to address all the problems. The Bill as it stands would introduce resource accounting, but would cause more problems than it solved. That point has been made by almost every right hon. and hon. Member who contributed to the debate.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) broadly supported the main themes, but seemed to suggest that individual Members of Parliament should have rights to propose spending increases. The right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) best expressed the overall view of the House from his considerable experience. He supported the argument of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden that there were no EU problems in limiting the powers of the NAO to all areas of Government expenditure.

The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) pointed out that a key apprenticeship for anyone seeking Government office should be membership of the PAC. He also made the point that the NAO believes that the Bill threatens to weaken the independence of the Comptroller and Auditor General and his accountability to Parliament. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) will, I hope, make constitutional history in proposing the Special Standing Committee and, importantly, proposing that the Financial Reporting Advisory Board, which is at present a creature of the Treasury, should be put on to an independent statutory basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) illustrated how effective the Bill has been in meeting the objective of bypassing difficult areas, including some £22 billion of defence expenditure and problems caused by intellectual rights and sophisticated weaponry. The hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) supported the proposal for a Special Standing Committee, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) gave a valuable survey of the benefits and case for resource accounting, but stressed that it would be risky to proceed with the Bill without adequate consultation and dialogue with the PAC and the Auditor General.

My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) highlighted the fact that there is no valid reason for excluding NHS trusts, although there are sound arguments for excluding schools. The hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) suggested that the power of the National Audit Office should be extended on a voluntary basis rather than on a statutory basis.

I conclude by repeating and stressing the bona fide commitment, given by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset, that the Conservative party will put in place an accounts commission to establish statements of national accounting practice for the public sector that will parallel those in the private sector. That commission, to be led by Sir Bryan Carsberg, will be implemented when the next Conservative Government are formed.

Finally, the Bill seems to smack of "Animal Farm". It is full of good intentions, but goes somewhere else. To misquote the novel, legs are good, but four legs are, apparently, bad.

9.36 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): Resource accounting and budgeting is right and necessary. It is right because our focus should no longer simply be on how we spend the cash each year, but rather on what we get for our money. We should focus on outputs rather than on inputs, and on delivery of service rather than on process.

The private sector realised long ago that more comprehensive financial statements were necessary in the modern world. It is time for the Government to recognise that as well, and the reforms in the Bill are the backbone of our modernising agenda. However, resource accounting and budgeting goes further. Under the new system, there

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

will be a summary of resource outturns reflecting parliamentary control and, of critical importance, a statement of resources for the aims and objectives of Departments under their public service agreements. With resource accounting and budgeting, there will be only clear and unambiguously prudent planning and control of public expenditure.

I come now to the extent of parliamentary consultation and involvement in preparing the Bill. That matter has exercised a number of hon. Members—perhaps I should refer to them as hon. Gentlemen, as no hon. Lady has taken part in the debate. Parliament has been involved in the resource accounting and budgeting project from day one. The previous Administration published a Green Paper in July 1994 and a White Paper in 1995. Memorandums on the subject have been submitted to Parliament, and there have been parliamentary hearings and the subsequent publication of reports on resource accounting and budgeting by the Public Accounts Committee and by the Treasury Committee. The Procedure Committee has also covered the project, so it is clear that Parliament has played an important role throughout its development.

The debate has been worth while, and several hon. Members have noted that the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office have been involved at all stages of the Bill's drafting process. They have seen all drafts and have been involved in the process since the earliest days.

Mr. David Davis: I accept that what the Economic Secretary says is accurate, but two points stand out. First, the memorandum given to the Public Accounts Committee in March differed significantly from the final Bill, as I pointed out in my speech. Secondly, the draft Bill was shown to the National Audit Office only three weeks before its publication date. That does not constitute full consultation.

Miss Johnson: I did not say that we had consulted as much as we should have liked. I said that the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office had been involved.

Mr. Davis *indicated assent.*

Miss Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman agrees that it is not true that those bodies were not involved. I believe that the Government have already apologised for being unable to send a draft of the Bill to the Public Accounts Committee or to other relevant Select Committees. I repeat that apology, but a draft Bill was simply not available in time. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman is aware of the problems that can arise in that connection. However, as I said, Treasury officials consulted closely with the NAO throughout the process. The Treasury has attempted to keep Committees informed of progress on policy development and the implementation of the resource accounting and budgeting project. It will continue to do so.

Mr. Letwin: If it was an unfortunate fact of life that, after two and half years of government and five years of implementation of the Labour programme, the Government could not make the Bill available in time, will the Minister grant the House the Special Standing Committee that would relieve us of the need to divide?

Miss Johnson: I shall come to that matter much later.

We are committed to ensuring that reporting to Parliament will continue throughout the implementation phase. As the availability and relevance of information of interest to Parliament increases, memorandums will be submitted to Parliament to provide regular updates on policy and implementation.

Resource accounting and budgeting will significantly improve the outdated and outmoded system of cash-based accounting in two distinct ways. First, the full economic cost of Government activities will be capable of proper measurement by the inclusion of costs such as capital consumption that are not reflected in cash-based accounts. It will also match costs to the right time period, providing Government with a better basis for allocating resources. Secondly, there will be improvements in the treatment of capital spending. Instead of simply identifying the full cost in the year of acquisition, the cost of capital will be spread over its useful life.

The Government have introduced four trigger points, to which several hon. Members have referred. I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) that trigger point 2 has been successfully passed by all Departments. There is no problem about that. All Departments have moved on to trigger point 3, which involves the NAO in carrying out an audit of dry-run resource accounts from Departments for 1998–99. The final trigger point is scheduled for next summer, and Departments will make available to Select Committees dry-run, resource-based estimates for 2000–01 as soon as possible after the cash-based 2000–01 main estimates are produced.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): My hon. Friend may not be aware that the Agriculture Committee has already been taken through resource-based accounts. There was a great deal of discussion and explanation of them, and the only issue that arose was that some hon. Members, particularly from the Opposition Benches, did not turn up for that.

Miss Johnson: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's knowledge of what has been done on resource accounting and budgeting in the Agriculture Committee. It is disappointing, given the fuss that they have made, that Opposition Members were not present.

Following the trigger points, we aim that resource accounting and budgeting should lead to whole-of-Government accounts. These will fulfil the commitment given in the code for fiscal stability to produce accounts for the whole public sector, on a consolidated basis if possible. Audited whole-of-Government accounts will improve the information available to support the conduct and monitoring of fiscal policy. Those accounts will also improve accountability to Parliament and provide greater transparency for taxpayers.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the introduction of resource accounting have any effect on the calculations of the golden rule?

Miss Johnson: I should not imagine that it would.

To produce full, audited, whole-of-Government accounts, we will need greater conformity of accounting policies, systems and procedures. Those are major challenges. The Government have decided to adopt a staged approach in which we will first concentrate on delivering audited accounts that cover central Government Departments, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. A final decision to extend coverage to the whole public sector will be taken in due course when the outcomes of various possible developments in financial reporting and further development work is clearer. The purpose of the clauses relating to whole-of-Government accounts is to enable the Treasury to prepare as efficiently as possible by adopting relevant best practice consolidation procedures used in the private sector.

Several hon. Members have mentioned Partnerships UK. As well as covering resource accounting, the Bill puts in place the foundations for another strand of our drive to modernise our key public services—the creation of PUK. That new public-private partnership will operate in the private sector, but with a clear public mission. PUK will offer a long-term home to the type of deal-making skills that are currently temporarily available to the public sector through the Treasury task force. PUK will be instrumental in helping the public sector to address the key weaknesses in the current public-private sector partnership process. In that way, the public sector will become a more effective client. The bottom line is that PUK will help to deliver better value for money and more investment in front-line services.

Since the Government came to power just two and a half years ago, we have fundamentally reformed the PFI. We have prioritised projects, ended universal testing, offered a fairer deal to staff, and standardised contracts. We have put the PFI on a stable and modern footing. We now need to use the new PFI to drive forward our programme to modernise public services in sectors where it has not worked before; we need to develop new, more collaborative partnerships with the private sector as part of our wider public-private partnership programme.

PUK will allow the public sector to form partnerships with the private sector on equal terms. As a public-private partnership in the private sector, but operating in the interests of the public sector, PUK will be able to offer a longer-term home to the skill base required to support the public sector in the execution of public-private partnership deals. The business plan for PUK is now under development; we have been consulting widely throughout, so that PUK generates the greatest benefit for all the stakeholders in PFI—public sector and private sector alike.

My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) referred to the relationship between the Comptroller and Auditor General and the House. I can reassure him that the CAG will remain an Officer of the House of Commons. He will continue to have complete discretion to decide on his work, with the freedom to report exactly as he sees fit.

Several hon. Members, especially my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis)—both of whom have given distinguished service as Chairmen of the Public Accounts Committee—my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) and my hon. Friend the Member for Workington, raised issues about National Audit Office access. However, the Bill is not about public sector audit; it is intended to be about resource accounting—that is the fundamental point. The Government believe that it is right to focus on that important change without complicating matters.

Moreover, we are not aware that, in practice, there is a problem with NAO access in any regard. In each of the cases mentioned—contractors, non-departmental public bodies and public sector companies—the NAO has access by agreement. Indeed, hon. Members gave some examples of the NAO gaining access and doing extremely good work. I am not aware of any cases where the NAO has not been able to gain access.

Mr. Gardiner: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way on that point, because she had left the Chamber when I commented on the investigation of the national lottery. Although the Government had allowed access, Camelot had refused access. The Government must address situations similar to that; I trust that they will do so in Committee.

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I am aware of that issue; it is a legal one and is now close to resolution. I believe that the matter is being dealt with satisfactorily.

Dr. Palmer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way yet again. Does she agree that there will be widespread dismay—in accounting and in much wider circles—if the proposals are delayed due to those relatively minor points?

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks. There would be considerable anxiety.

Underpinning everything is a strong audit framework in the public sector, which is stronger than that in the private sector. The work of the Audit Commission in local government goes well beyond normal private sector audits. Therefore, I see no circumstances in which the Comptroller and Auditor General would need such access rights and could not rely on the work of other auditors. Indeed, the danger with such suggestions is that some organisations will be audited by two separate bodies, and we would need to be very careful about that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister is addressing the House, so I plead with it to come to order. Private conversations should be held outside the Chamber.

Miss Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) mentioned the Treasury discretion. The Treasury discretion to set up accounting rules is very far from unfettered. In fact, it will be more circumscribed under the proposed system than it is under the present system. Conservative Members have deliberately avoided that fact. We have tightened up the requirements under which the Treasury and everyone else will operate as a result of the Bill and the requirement to follow the generally accepted accounting practice—GAAP—and the discipline provided by the independent Financial Reporting Advisory Board means that the Treasury discretion to set accounting rules will be very limited under these proposals.

[Miss Johnson]

Several hon. Members referred to what the Bill will cover. It will deliver everything that they say they would like to achieve. Resource accounts will follow generally accepted accounting practice, but they will introduce the best accounting practice to the Government's own accounts. That means that, in the fullness of time when the whole-of-Government accounts are introduced, the points made by the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) will be covered. It is wrong to think that anything will be left outside those arrangements.

Mr. Letwin: I am sorry to trouble the hon. Lady again, but does she really maintain that schools, hospitals and the great preponderance of foads in this country will not be left out?

Miss Johnson: They will not be left out when the whole-of-Government accounts system is introduced.

Mr. Letwin: When will that be?

Miss Johnson: It will be as progress is made on the other things. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members may laugh, but I have the previous Government's White Paper entitled "Better Accounting for the Taxpayer's Money". It says:

"the Government will wish to concentrate in the first instance on successful implementation at a departmental level."

Whole-of-Government accounts will follow. We are doing nothing more than the previous Government recommended in the first place.

Several hon. Members mentioned the money voted by Parliament and the scrutiny of all expenditure. All the money voted by Parliament will pass through a Department's book and can be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General for accuracy, regularity and propriety. When the money is ultimately spent by another public sector body, it will be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General, another public sector auditor or possibly by one of its contractors. The Public Audit Forum is playing an increasingly important role in ensuring that all public bodies are audited to the same standards and under the same procedures.

Mr. Rendel: The Economic Secretary keeps telling us that the Comptroller and Auditor General has all the powers that he needs, but does she accept that he does not believe that he has them?

Miss Johnson: People have identified an issue that relates to the powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office. The fact is that the Bill does not concern those powers or access by the NAO to Government accounts. It concerns resource accounting and budgeting and there are many advantages to that.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Miss Johnson: I must make progress, or I will not have the opportunity to deal with points raised by one or two other hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) referred to the audit of departmental resource accounts. That is in progress, and as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said in his opening speech, the next memorandum to Parliament will report on progress and will include any Departments that have not passed trigger point 3. All that information will be forthcoming.

I come now to the advantages of the Bill and the hon. Member for Macclesfield's suggestion that there should be a Special Standing Committee. There has been a lot of synthetic fuss by Opposition Front-Bench Members. It is staggering that the shadow Chief Secretary has only recently arrived in the Chamber. It is remarkable that the Opposition amendment does not mention audit at all, despite the fact that the amendment was, no doubt, tabled after due consideration by the Opposition. Members of the Public Accounts Committee have, justifiably, been pursuing issues of concern to them, but I do not believe that Opposition Front-Bench Members are doing anything other than latching on to a respectable suggestion being made by those who have a respectable reason to make it.

As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary has said, we have listened very carefully. We have listened to the reasoned points made by right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, but we will not give way to the suggestion that there should be a Special Standing Committee. It is right to pursue the matter, and hon. Members have two vehicles for doing so. First, the Public Accounts Committee will do whatever it wants to do, and Ministers would be very wary of suggesting anything different.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miss Johnson: No, I regret that because time is short I will not give way.

Secondly, the Standing Committee will discuss the matter. I understand that no suggestion for a Special Standing Committee has been made through the usual channels.

Mr. Winterton: I have to say to the Economic Secretary that as the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, which is a Committee of this House, I am not answerable to the Opposition Front Bench, just as I am not answerable to the Government Front Bench. This is a proposal made by a House Committee to the Government because they failed to honour a commitment that they gave earlier in respect of the Bill.

Miss Johnson: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that there is a difference between the line that Opposition Front-Bench Members are pushing and the respectable suggestion that he has made, albeit during the debate, without thought beforehand and without going through the usual channels.

I shall now summarise the important aspects of the Bill. It is a very important Bill. It is one of the biggest ever reforms of the management of our country's public services, and I commend it to the House. It is a major milestone; it modernises the public sector and makes sure that we will make better use of the private sector. One of the real revolutions, as the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden pointed out, is the possibility

that much more meaningful management information will be available to the public sector and, indeed, to Members of the House who scrutinise these matters.

The accountability and transparency that will be provided through resource accounting and budgeting are substantial improvements on the existing arrangements. The Bill had solid bipartisan support when it originated and again in the debate today. I hope that the fact that we have said that we are open to dialogue means that the support will continue into the Standing Committee.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 140, Noes 327.

Division No. 8] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul

Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and Mr. Mike Hall.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

GOVERNMENT RESOURCES AND ACCOUNTS BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred by the Treasury under the Act;

(2) refunds of money paid into the Consolidated Fund as the result of an error;

(3) the charging on and payment out of the Consolidated Fund of sums required for fulfilling guarantees given by the Treasury;

(4) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money provided by Parliament under any other Act; and

(5) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. May I instruct the Serjeant at Arms that I have heard a complaint that no Division bells are ringing? Could that be looked into?

The House having divided: Ayes 318, Noes 3.

Division No. 9] **[10.16 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stringer, Graham
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*

Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

NOES

Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Gill, Christopher
Leigh, Edward

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Wilshire and
Mr. James Gray.

Question accordingly agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With the permission of the House, I shall take motions 3 and 4 together.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): No.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: In that case, I shall take them separately.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Pesticides (Maximum Residue Levels in Crops, Food and Feeding Stuffs) (England and Wales) Regulations 2000, which were laid before this House on 17th November, be approved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 2.

Division No. 10] **[10.29 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali

Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stringer, Graham
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

NOES

Gray, James
Wilshire, David

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. Edward Leigh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

That the draft Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999, which were laid before this House on 22nd November, be approved.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

The House divided: Ayes 277, Noes 2.

Division No. 11] **[10.39 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kidney, David
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok

Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
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Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

NOES

Gray, James
Leigh, Edward

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. Christopher Gill.

Question accordingly agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to Committees.

Ordered,

AGRICULTURE

That Ms Sally Keeble and Mrs. Diana Organ be discharged from the Agriculture Committee and Mr. David Borrow and Mr. David Drew be added to the Committee.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

That Mrs. Diana Organ be added to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

DEFENCE

That Ms Dari Taylor be discharged from the Defence Committee and Mr. Stephen Hepburn be added to the Committee.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS

That Dr. Alan Whitehead be discharged from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee and Mr. Hilary Benn be added to the Committee.

HOME AFFAIRS

That Mr. Chris Mullin be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Mr. Ian Cawsey be added to the Committee.

SOCIAL SECURITY

That Mr. David Crausby be added to the Social Security Committee.—*[Mr. John McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

PETITION

Council Tax

10.50 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I present a petition from Helen Houghton and 740 electors from my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac), who is present. They live in pensioners' flats, which are rated as band A for council tax purposes, with values up to £40,000, and pay the same council tax as people with two, three and four-bedroom houses, because the average three-bedroom terraced house in Grimsby and Cleethorpes is valued at £30,000 or less.

Helen Houghton, the lead signatory, pays £43 a month, allowing for the reduction for single people, which she would get whatever band her accommodation was in.

The petition asks for a new lower band to be created for such accommodation for pensioners and students in flats and bedsits. The petition states:

The Humble Petition of Helen Houghton, pensioner, and 740 others of like disposition, sheweth

That living in warden controlled dwellings in Grimsby and North East Lincolnshire, as your Petitioners all do, they are required to pay the same Council Tax for their bedsit accommodation as those living in their own houses with as many as three bedrooms, because their properties are all in the same band.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your honourable House will consider the plight of pensioners in group dwellings and introduce a new additional band to cover this type of property.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

The petition is signed by Helen Houghton, 3 Stratford house, Barmouth drive, Grimsby, Joyce Miller, 1 Stratford house, Barmouth drive, Grimsby, and 738 others. I commend it to the House.

To lie upon the Table.

Integrated Transport Policy (Weston-super-Mare)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

10.52 pm

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): I am delighted to have the opportunity to debate a subject that is very important to my constituents. Integrated transport will be the way of the future. It means implementing transport policies that work with, not against, each other, offer genuine alternatives, especially to private car users, and better address the needs of rural and urban areas alike.

An integrated transport strategy must put people at its heart. Lack of access to affordable and reliable transport cuts people off from essential services and from their family and friends, and can limit employment opportunities.

Weston-super-Mare lost its bus station in 1986. The site was sold off by the bus company, the station demolished and a block of flats built in its place. A local resident was quoted in the local *Mercury* newspaper shortly after my election as saying:

"It was the worst day of our lives when our old bus station was sold off and demolished. It has left retired and disabled bus users, not to mention tourists, out in the cold."

That sums it up well.

Weston is a seaside resort and is well worth a visit. As a holiday destination it needs to offer a warm welcome to visitors. I am pleased to say that residents and those involved in the tourism industry do a great job in making it a nice place to stay, but sometimes first impressions count. What first impression do visitors to Weston arriving by bus or coach get?

The tourist information office in Weston told me that the current situation is, at best, confusing. People, especially tourists, do not know where buses leave from and, as there are currently several bus focus areas, it can be difficult to direct them precisely. The office says that it has to handle a lot of queries about transport issues, thereby reducing the time available to help people with tourism issues. Problems are caused on the sea front, where day trippers come in coaches that interfere with the usual bus stopping areas. Local buses have to double park, causing congestion and a possible safety hazard.

One of the workers at the local disability information service told me what happened when she was waiting at the main car park in the town centre, which is used by some national coach companies as a pick-up point. She was waiting for a 1 am coach to Dover, but the coach did not arrive until 5 am because of a breakdown. She was with a group of 20 people, many of them elderly and frail, and the conditions were freezing. There was no shelter, nowhere to sit down and no information about what was happening. Had there been a bus station, that need not have happened.

Another situation arose when an elderly lady came to Weston for a week's holiday. She was dropped off by the coach on the sea front at 8 pm, but her hotel was some way away. There was no telephone, no taxi service, no shops open and no toilets. After carrying her case through the rain for nearly an hour to her hotel, it took her two days to recover and, naturally enough, she does not intend to come back to Weston.

[Mr. Brian Cotter]

Since 1986, there has been continuing demand for a bus station and transport interchange in the town. We need to see true integration of services, bringing together north Somerset council, First Bus, Southern National, National Express, Great Western Trains, and Wales and West Trains in a genuine transport focus. Hand in hand with that would be through-ticketing on buses and trains, which should be easy because Badgerline and Great Western are owned by the same company.

People in Weston and elsewhere have concerns about the sale of railway land. One site in Weston is up for grabs, but it should be considered as a possible site for transport integration. A bus station would provide shelter, security, information and refreshment for visitors and residents alike. A high quality interchange system centred around a bus station, the town centre and the railway station would enable people conveniently to mix and match bus, train, walking, car and bicycle.

North Somerset council does not have the budget to build a bus station, but the mega-rich First group, which now owns Bristol airport, runs Great Western Trains and has a near monopoly of bus routes in my part of the west country, certainly has the resources. I would like the Government to take on the bus giants and demand better investment in bus services throughout Britain.

Those of my constituents who live in rural areas often say to me that the Government are more concerned about the problems of urban areas and cities than they are about village life and the countryside. In fact, one in four of my constituents lives in the rural areas around Weston-super-Mare. The villages of north Somerset make a wonderful place to live—I should know because I live in one of them—but the people who live in them are being forced into their cars by inadequate public transport links. North Somerset council subsidises the bus company, mostly in rural areas, by some £250,000 a year. Despite that, too many villages have expensive and inadequate bus links.

An extraordinary story appeared in the papers this morning about Badgerline, the bus company that serves my constituency. A fully loaded bus ground to a halt half way up a hill. The driver had to ask the passengers to disembark. He then drove to the top of the hill and waited for the passengers to catch up so that they could carry on with their trip. It is bizarre for a bus company to be unable to run its buses properly. The last time I heard such a story was in a Postman Pat book. As it happens, that all took place in the nearby town of Bath, not in my constituency.

Local authorities try to respond to transport needs, but they have little power to oblige bus and train operators to compete with the car instead of with each other. At the moment, those operators have to give only minimal notice if they alter services. That is not conducive to providing high-quality information, nor to winning passengers' loyalty.

Local authorities spend thousands of pounds promoting the use of buses by means of timetables, route maps, new bus shelters and anti-drink driving campaigns—all of which provide free publicity for the bus companies. However, councils get no return on the money spent. The bus companies have complete control of timetables, fares, routes, and so on.

The village of Hutton in my constituency had an important link to the local hospital that was broken recently. The village has many elderly residents, and that was a major blow. The bus company responded by saying that the route was not profitable. Increasingly, it is being left to cash-strapped local authorities to keep open such routes, which can be lifelines. Rural communities need lower fares and more convenient and accessible services, so that public transport can be a realistic alternative in people's transport needs.

The Government must take a lead in guaranteeing decent service levels for communities such as those in north Somerset. Traffic problems will get worse if action is not taken. Banwell village in my constituency has the highest level of air pollution in the district. The pollution is caused by the dense, slow-moving or stationary traffic on the A371 that goes through the village. It is worth stating that benzine and nitrogen dioxide—the pollutants associated with high levels of road traffic—exacerbate the symptoms of people, and especially of children, suffering from lung disease. They also promote the development of cancers and reduce the supply of oxygen to the heart. All those health issues are very serious.

Many small villages are becoming more dangerous and unpleasant to live in and visit because of the growth in traffic. The Council for the Protection of Rural England has estimated that traffic in rural areas could double by 2025. In places such as Banwell, village life is being choked to death. Something must be done.

The provisional local transport plan submitted to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions by North Somerset council includes a proposal to undertake an assessment of transport options for relieving Banwell, and the possibility of a bypass. I urge that a more detailed study be made. I would strongly support that. I also urge that prompt action be taken, with Government support, to follow it up.

Congresbury, the village in which I live, lies on the B3133, a narrow country lane linking my village with the village of Churchill. However, in common with all too many lanes in our country, it is used as a rat run—in this case, between the bigger A370 and the A38. The B3133 is used in particular by heavy goods vehicles, which cause considerable damage to the road and to the properties alongside it. Some walls have been knocked down, and some buildings demolished, by HGVs using the road.

Action must be taken to stop heavy lorries using country lanes as rat runs. The damage caused by lorries using inappropriate roads can be reduced by establishing strategic lorry routes with direction signing and restrictions on weight and height. Indeed, North Somerset council agrees that the only solution is to establish such a strategy for sustainable freight distribution. However, it states that it is not in a position to commence any work to that end. I hope that the Minister will consider ways in which the Department can support the authority in making the matter a priority.

Recently, the problem in rural areas in my constituency was compounded by simultaneous road works on the M5, the A370 and the A38, which are all link roads into Weston-super-Mare. The result, in addition to lengthy traffic jams on the roads concerned, was to encourage traffic to make even more rat runs through villages and along country lanes. We should appreciate it in Weston-super-Mare and in other areas if the Government

could ensure that roadworks were better planned so that not all main roads in an area were dug up at the same time.

Finally, the Government's transport Bill proposes to establish a Strategic Rail Authority, which will no doubt help to repair the damage done by rail privatisation. Still absent, however, are proposals for a strategic transport authority that would cover all forms of transport. That is critical if true integration of transport is to be achieved. People in my constituency want and deserve a truly integrated transport system that will help to tackle the problems experienced in towns and villages alike. I look forward to hearing what the Minister hopes to do about these issues.

11.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): May I begin, as is usual, by congratulating the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) on securing the debate? May I also thank him for his courtesy in giving me notice of the key issues that he intended to raise? Let me reassure him immediately that the Government are fully committed to improving the transport system in Weston-super-Mare, and, indeed, in north Somerset and the whole country.

We want a system that is safe, efficient, clean and fair, and we want everyone to be able to have better choice in transport. We will do that by improving public transport, and traffic management and road maintenance, and by creating a more integrated transport system. Before turning to the Government's general progress in implementing our commitment to a more integrated transport system, I would like to respond to some points that the hon. Gentleman made about transport issues in and around Weston-super-Mare.

Each local transport authority is required to prepare a local transport plan, setting out its strategy for transport together with proposals to carry that strategy forward. The provisional local transport plan for north Somerset is currently being assessed by my officials in the Government Office for the South West, so I must be careful not to comment on the merits of proposals in the plan or to speculate on the likely allocation of resources. However, I can make some general observations about the plan.

In preparing the plan, I understand that the council invited wide public participation on how it should address transport needs in its area. To achieve effective participation, five stakeholder workshops were established to maximise local information and to build a consensus about the way forward, while also thinking about the wider context. Each workshop contained a mixture of interests, including Government, statutory authorities, interest groups and organisations, and citizens and users. The workshops were locally based and one covered Weston-super-Mare and surrounding areas. The Government very much welcome North Somerset council's approach in involving local people in the development of its plan.

The process highlighted the perception among people in the district that public transport currently offers a poor alternative to the car. The plan also highlights the problems of congestion on the M5 and the A370 and the problems of heavy lorries using country roads. The hon. Gentleman has already expressed his concerns on these subjects in correspondence with Ministers as well as in the debate.

The plan acknowledges that air pollution levels are high in some places. North Somerset council will need to consider drawing up action plans on air quality where it does not meet acceptable standards. The hon. Gentleman is particularly concerned about that problem in Banwell, as a result of heavy lorries using the main road though the village. He will be aware that the provisional local transport plan identifies a bypass as one option for relieving the village's traffic problems.

The plan also identifies a wide range of opportunities for improving public transport and for addressing other transport issues in the district. These include increasing the frequency of both rail and bus services, more park-and-ride schemes, bus priority measures, and fully integrated ticketing. Meanwhile, new measures have already been introduced, including a quality partnership between North Somerset council and First Badgerline buses. The aim of the partnership is to achieve joint measures that will promote the use of local bus services, including investigating the development of a flexible feeder system linking rural bus services with those along main routes.

The council proposes to develop a database, which will be used for a telephone inquiry service and also for keeping an electronic record of all bus stop locations. I am also aware that the council has, together with local partners, applied for funding through the rural bus challenge. We are currently considering that and other bids, and hope to make an announcement shortly.

The hon. Gentleman made some observations about inadequate rural bus services. I understand that North Somerset council did not make a bid for the Government's rural bus grant scheme—funding of about £170 million over three years—that has led to the development of 1,800 new and refurbished bus routes in our rural areas nationwide.

North Somerset council has made it clear that it has not been able to make as much progress as it would have liked on some of the elements in the provisional plan. However, I understand that the council will be developing more detailed proposals during the next few months, for inclusion in the full local transport plan to be submitted next summer.

Clearly, it is for the council to decide the content of its local transport plan. However, guidance issued to all local transport authorities points to the need for plans to address a wide range of transport issues, including those relating to public transport interchanges, rural bus services, air quality and the transportation of freight—matters to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have taken major steps in promoting a more integrated transport system. Our White Paper on the future of transport, which we published within 18 months of being elected, was the first comprehensive statement of transport policy for nearly 20 years. For the first time, we want to integrate transport policy with other key related matters, such as the environment, health, education and land-use planning. The White Paper sets out the framework for sustainable transport for this and the next Parliament, and beyond.

[Mr. Keith Hill]

Of course, we realise that motorists will not readily switch to public transport unless it is significantly better and more reliable. That is why the aim of the White Paper is to increase choice by improving public transport and providing better conditions for pedestrians and cyclists. To do that, we are committed to providing more resources for local transport—the comprehensive spending review allocated a further £700 million over the next three years. As I pointed out, we are also spending an extra £170 million on rural buses.

In order to put those new measures into practice, we published the new Transport Bill last Wednesday. The Bill contains measures to promote the use of railways through the Strategic Rail Authority, to improve bus services and to reduce road congestion and pollution. From time to time, there have been questions about the apparent delay in introducing that legislation. The truth is that there are no instantaneous solutions, and much preparatory work was required to enable us to identify policies to overcome the failures of the past 20 years.

We inherited high and growing levels of road traffic congestion, poor public transport, inadequate provision for pedestrians and cyclists, and significant under-investment in road maintenance. Nevertheless, we have already made significant headway through increased investment, especially in public transport and road maintenance. The measures contained in the Bill pave the way for the modern, effective transport system that the country needs and deserves.

The Bill establishes the Strategic Rail Authority, to which the hon. Gentleman referred. The mission of the SRA will be to promote the use of the railways for passengers and freight, to secure the development of the railway network, and to contribute to an integrated transport system. The Bill also recognises the fact that buses are crucial to the success of our integrated transport system and can provide a real alternative to car use. It therefore gives local authorities the power to improve local bus services through quality partnerships and quality contracts. About 130 such partnerships have already been established, voluntarily, throughout the country—often leading to major increases in bus usage of between 10 and 40 per cent. The Bill also includes provisions to improve passenger information, to encourage integrated ticketing and to promote service stability.

In addition, the Bill gives local authorities new powers to introduce charges on congested roads and to introduce workplace parking charges. The money raised will be put back into improving local transport, improving choice and tackling congestion.

As I said earlier, it will be for local authorities to put those and other measures into practice. We believe that local people are best placed to find local solutions to local transport problems. That is why we have introduced local transport plans as a centrepiece of our proposals. Those are replacing the existing transport policies and programmes system of annual submissions, and provide a more strategic, longer term view.

Local transport plans set out authorities' strategies for transport, and will be the key mechanism for pulling all that activity together locally. They include all forms of transport and set out proposals for implementation, including road user and workplace parking charges, and bus quality partnerships. There will also be greater certainty of funding for local authorities and significantly greater local discretion over the allocation of resources.

As a first stage in that process, all county and unitary authorities have now submitted their provisional five-year plans, on the basis of which resources will be allocated for the next financial year. Authorities will then roll their plans on by one year and next summer will submit full plans for the period from 2001 to 2006. We are currently assessing the provisional plans, and will shortly be announcing the allocation of resources for next year.

From the feedback so far, it would seem that authorities are responding positively to the challenge of producing local transport plans. They have overwhelmingly welcomed the national policy framework and the process of preparing plans is acting as a positive force for change.

Although a great deal of work has already been done to improve public transport in this country, we recognise that much more needs to be done to implement the measures in the White Paper. We are fully committed to establishing a new and better transport system, and to ensuring that the necessary financial resources are in place. The national framework has now been put fully in place with the publication of the new Transport Bill, and it is now for local authorities to take matters forward.

At a local level, North Somerset council is clearly committed to creating a more integrated transport system in its district. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that is too early for me to speculate on the outcome of the local transport plan process in North Somerset or on the work that needs to be done in preparing a full plan for submission next year. However, the position on the provisional plan will become clearer when the allocations are made for the new financial year, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that an announcement on that will be made very shortly.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eighteen minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 7 December 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(By Order)*
Order for consideration, as amended, read.
To be considered on Tuesday 14 December.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

EU Enlargement

1. **Mr. Jeff Ennis** (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): If he will make a statement on Government policy on enlargement of the European Union. [99943]

5. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): If he will make a statement on enlargement issues to be discussed at the next intergovernmental conferences. [99947]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): Britain is a leading advocate of enlargement within the European Union. At Helsinki, I am hopeful that we will secure our objective of opening negotiations with a further six countries. We will also seek an intergovernmental conference that will meet the target of preparing the European Union for enlargement by 2002. That will require it to be focused on essential reforms to the size of the Commission and the weight of votes in the Council.

Within the next few years, the European Union will have a total membership of more than 25 countries and will be a third larger again in population and consumers. It will be even more important for Britain to be respected as a constructive leading partner within Europe and to be remembered by the new members as an ally and friend of their membership.

Mr. Ennis: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Conservative party's threat to veto the outcome of the next intergovernmental conference is a threat to veto EU enlargement? Does he agree that that would threaten the future stability of central and eastern Europe, and work against the United Kingdom's national interests?

Mr. Cook: The national interests of Britain are my responsibility and concern, and I can think of nothing that would damage them more than if the countries of central and eastern Europe saw the Conservative party seeking to block enlargement. The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) confirmed last week that, if the Opposition do not secure their eccentric vision of a pick and mix Europe at the forthcoming IGC, they will block it. By doing so, they would block the next round of enlargement, making enemies of every country in central and eastern Europe.

Miss McIntosh: As a member of the Conservative party, I passionately share the vision of an enlarged European Union. However, does the Foreign Secretary share my concern that one discussion to take place at the Helsinki summit will involve future arrangements for defence, particularly a rapid reaction force? Does he agree that that may send the wrong message to applicant countries from central and eastern Europe who have joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation only this year? Might that not prejudice their applications to join the EU by 2002?

Mr. Cook: We have held discussions with the three applicant countries that are members of NATO—Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. All of them support what we propose, and we shall seek to ensure that there is provision for consultation with countries that currently have status within the Western European Union or NATO. That covers all the applicant countries. I know of no country that would share the hon. Lady's anxiety. On the contrary, all of them are keen to join a strong and secure EU that can play its part in the world, although that vision of the EU does not always appear to be shared by those on the Conservative Benches.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): When so many of the countries to which my right hon. Friend refers are new to the principles of democracy, why do we not introduce criteria based on good governance, particularly in the way in which their Parliaments operate, when we consider whether to allow them into the European Union?

Mr. Cook: I refer my hon. Friend to the Copenhagen criteria, which lay out for countries seeking membership detailed requirements on democracy, freedom of the media, human rights and tolerance of ethnic community rights. Countries will not simply be required to meet those criteria when they join; many of them are already taking vigorous steps because of the stimulus of membership. Ethnic minority rights, for example, are being strengthened across central and eastern Europe as a result of the accession process. We shall continue to insist on those rights, but the best way in which to ensure that democracy takes firm root in those countries is to ensure that we advance their membership of a European Union of democratic nations.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): One matter that may be discussed at the intergovernmental conference is the removal of national vetoes on tax matters. Tax changes have always been thought to require a treaty change, but there are threats to use qualified majority voting under single market rules to enact the withholding

tax directive. Is the Foreign Secretary confident that such action would be outside the terms of the treaty, and that EU tax legislation requires unanimity?

Mr. Cook: Yes.

Mr. Maples: There is some confusion over this matter as a result of the Commission's threat to use QMV. Will the Foreign Secretary commit the Government to obtaining a clear statement in the summit conclusions that tax directives cannot in any circumstances be implemented by QMV?

Mr. Cook: At Helsinki, we intend first to ensure that the eurobond market in the City of London is fully protected against any tax proposals. Secondly, we shall insist in the IGC that taxation must be resolved by unanimity. I note that the hon. Gentleman has not taken the opportunity to tell us whether he will drop his own policy. If he sticks with it, I shall go to Helsinki as the only national representative whose Opposition are committed to stopping enlargement.

Madam Speaker: Mr. Barnes.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree—

Madam Speaker: Order. I called the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes).

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I am all for expansion of the European Union, but are there not some problems in that a number of the eastern European countries that will be seeking membership are emerging from being dominated by politburos? Should they not be entering systems where no vestiges of those operate, so that the Copenhagen principles can begin to be applied to the European Union? Are measures being taken to make the EU a democratic provision that democratic nations can join?

Mr. Cook: I agree with my hon. Friend. There is considerable room for taking forward transparency within the European Union. During the British presidency, we sought to do so and we continue to press for that agenda. In particular, we will continue to press for the publication of the way in which votes are cast within the Councils of Ministers.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): What about the House of Lords?

Mr. Cook: I do not think that that comes within the scope of the intergovernmental conference, which will give us an opportunity to provide for more transparency in democracy and more effective institutions within the European Union.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): For those of us who have consistently argued in favour of enlargement since the 1980s—unlike Labour members—will the Foreign Secretary be good enough to comment on the fact that a precondition of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and indeed Hungary and Poland, entering into serious negotiations for the enlarged European Union is that they should be obliged to accept the whole of the acquis communautaire? That is regarded with great concern in those countries. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, far from being friends and allies in this matter, unless he and the Government are prepared to stand up for these people and allow them to make their own choices, it will be nothing more or less than blackmail, and that is not the act of a friend?

Mr. Cook: I can assure the House that the Governments of those countries all want to join the European Union as full members. To do so, they must accept the full acquis. I noted that the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman made a speech this week in which he said that Conservative policy is that candidate countries should not be required to accept the full acquis. If, for instance, three of those countries had been given the option of opting out of the full acquis, they would not now be closing the unsafe nuclear reactors that they are obliged to close to meet environmental legislation. It would no more be in Britain's interests to allow a pick and mix approach by applicant countries than to allow it for present member states.

Madam Speaker: I now call the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner).

Mr. Gardiner: I apologise, Madam Speaker, for my premature expostulation.

Does my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary agree that the enlargement of the European Union to include Cyprus and candidate status for Turkey will do a great deal to heal wounds and divisions in that part of the world and would, one hopes, bring peace to that part of Europe?

Mr. Cook: In that part of the world, it is perhaps rash to make quite such a generous prediction, but I assure my hon. Friend that we will work at Helsinki for Turkey to be declared a candidate country. Turkey has a long way to go to meet the Copenhagen criteria and cannot start negotiations until it does meet them, but we believe that it will encourage Turkey to do so and to make the extra effort required if we recognise it as a candidate country and give that encouragement to those who see Europe as the inspiration for the future of Turkey.

Mozambique (Royal Visit)

2. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): If he will make a statement about Her Majesty the Queen's state visit to Mozambique. [99944]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Her Majesty the Queen visited Mozambique on 15 November and I was delighted to accompany her. As the Commonwealth's newest member, Mozambique has made remarkable economic, political and social progress since the end of the brutal civil war in 1992 and it now enjoys an established working democracy.

Helen Jackson: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. I am sure that he will agree that, from being counted as one of the poorest countries in the world, Mozambique is now one of southern Africa's success stories. That is largely due to the way in which its Government have

worked alongside Britain and other developed countries to establish effective anti-poverty programmes, which have led to two thirds of its debt being written off. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend would tell the House, following Her Majesty the Queen's recent visit, what further steps the Government propose to build on that valuable work.

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend's comments. Mozambique, having been engulfed by a brutal civil war until the 1990s—effectively supported by elements in the west and the old apartheid regime in South Africa—has now rebuilt its economy and has enjoyed two successive years of double-digit growth. It is a good place to invest. British businesses should look to get in there quickly. I have asked the high commissioner in Maputo to take forward a new programme to improve links between information technology companies and universities in Mozambique and Britain.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): What discussions did the Minister or his officials have in Mozambique on the economic effect of HIV-AIDS, and especially that country's ability to fulfil the structural adjustments programme for the International Monetary Fund?

Mr. Hain: We raised all those issues. AIDS is a dreadful epidemic throughout Africa, claiming 5,500 lives a day—an extraordinary total. Mozambique is also engulfed by that plague. So we have worked with the Mozambique Government and stand ready to do so further. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development runs an active programme of close co-operation with Mozambique and visited it last year. We shall work with Mozambique to improve its economy in every possible way.

Internet (Embassies and High Commissions)

4. **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): What use his Department is making of the internet for giving out information from the UK's embassies and high commissions. [99946]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): The Foreign Office is making use of the internet to give out information from our embassies and high commissions and offer a wide variety of information and advice on British Government policy, export leads, investment opportunities and travel advice.

Mr. Bruce: I recently had the need for urgent information about Slovenia and used the Foreign Office system. I congratulate the Minister and all those involved on the efficiency and effectiveness of the system. I understand that it was set up at low cost to Her Majesty's Government. I just wonder—there is always a sting in the tail, in case the Foreign Secretary thinks that I have gone native—whether Foreign Office Ministers could have a word with their colleagues in the Home Office about the use of information technology to produce new passports. Clearly, where the Foreign Office is making savings and provides an excellent service, the Home Office is not. I am sure that the Minister agrees that to use information technology to increase the price of passports by a third is ridiculous.

Mr. Battle: The hon. Gentleman has taken a keen interest in computing, websites, the internet and e-commerce—terms that he used before they were popular. I thank him for his compliment. To date, 52 British missions have their own websites linked to the main FCO website. Recently, we announced another £12 million of funding to provide internet-based information kiosks to promote the United Kingdom overseas. That should enhance our web presence for electronic service delivery. We shall be linking through, and signposting, British Trade International, the British Council, the British Tourist Authority and the Invest in Britain Bureau.

I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's compliments on our FCO site. It has won six new media industry awards and it has recently been shortlisted for the best Government website award, the winner of which will be announced in January. I simply draw that to the attention of the Home Office.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Does my hon. Friend recall how the previous Administration denied to the diplomatic service adequate resources—indeed, imposed severe cuts on it? Does he find it astonishing, as I do, that the Conservative party still resists and opposes further investment in information technology? It does so to such a degree that one believes that it is evidence of xenophobia, not to say hostility to our economic interests.

Mr. Battle: I have made a few visits to posts and I have not found that the staff abroad are resistant to new technology. They are keen to get it up and running. A member of staff in one of our embassies introduced me to the new e-expression "electronic trade portals". This is the future jargon for cyberspace. The staff are keen to get into the modern age and use the best technology available to ensure that they give out the best practical advice to people travelling abroad and people who want to do business well in overseas countries.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

6. **Mr. Malcolm Savidge** (Aberdeen, North): What plans he has to encourage progress on the comprehensive test ban treaty and nuclear non-proliferation. [99948]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): We will continue to work with key countries to bring the CTBT into force as soon as possible and to promote the aims of nuclear non-proliferation.

Mr. Savidge: Does my hon. Friend share the view of the Prime Minister, President Chirac and Chancellor Schröder that nuclear proliferation remains the major threat to world safety as we move into the new millennium? Will Her Majesty's Government consider

what further initiatives we can take to give fresh impetus to the whole process of confidence-building measures and of disarmament?

Mr. Hain: Of course I agree with the Prime Minister. To answer my hon. Friend's question seriously, we are concerned to make rapid progress on nuclear disarmament; we are working hard to reach agreement on a fissile material cut-off treaty, to bring the comprehensive test ban treaty into force and to encourage many other countries to sign up to it and ratify it, as we have done. We want to see progress in other matters, especially in the run-up to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty conference in New York next spring.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Is it not a matter of profound concern and disappointment that the United States Senate recently refused to ratify the test ban treaty? Is not that disappointment and concern underlined by proposals in Washington to depart from the anti-ballistic missile treaty of 1972? In the light of those policy developments in Washington, what is the Minister's assessment of the likelihood of persuading India and Pakistan to accept the terms of the test ban treaty?

Mr. Hain: I share—as indeed does President Clinton—the frustration at Capitol Hill's refusal, by a narrow vote in the Senate, to support the comprehensive test ban treaty. That was a grievous blow to the objectives of the treaty—I know that the right hon. and learned Gentleman, like the Government, wants them to be implemented. However, it is significant that the Administration in Washington has managed to put through their payment to the comprehensive test ban treaty organisation this year. That is a sign of where they stand. The Washington Administration are also committed to negotiate over national missile defence systems—if they decide to proceed with that programme—with the Russians and others, so that would not injure the anti-ballistic missile treaty.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Does my hon. Friend share my concern as to the likely success of the comprehensive test ban treaty, given the allegation in today's newspapers about the alleged breach of the land mines convention? Should not breaches of that convention, and of the comprehensive test ban treaty—if such breaches are successful—give us grave cause for concern?

Mr. Hain: I am most concerned about the failure of Pakistan and India to sign up to the comprehensive test ban treaty—I think that is what my hon. Friend was referring to. I am also concerned about the reports that a Channel 4 "Dispatches" programme alleges that criminal offences may have been committed under the Landmines Act 1998, and identifies an official at the Pakistani high commission. I view those allegations extremely seriously. The Foreign Office referred the matter immediately to Customs and Excise. This morning, I summoned the Pakistani high commissioner and explained to him the seriousness of the allegations.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I follow the excellent question of the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) by drawing to the Minister's attention the fact that, in the past, treaties which we thought that everyone had signed in good faith—I refer in particular to the 1972 biological weapons convention—were subsequently systematically flouted, by the former Soviet Union in the case of the 1972 treaty. When the Minister makes statements as to the desirability of strengthening non-proliferation, will he be cautious about referring to a nuclear-free world as the eventual outcome? We must always bear in mind that, desirable though treaties are, people can always cheat on them afterwards.

Mr. Hain: Of course.

Angola

7. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe): What actions the United Kingdom is taking to discourage financial and other support for UNITA which prolongs the war in Angola. [99949]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): It is vital that UNITA is starved of the fuel, arms and munitions supplies that enable it to maintain its murderous war, and I have taken fresh action to help to achieve that. The Bank of England has recently blocked five UNITA bank accounts.

Dr. Palmer: I am grateful to the Minister for his prompt action. Will he comment on the persistent reports that senior officials in Zambia, Uganda and Ukraine are helping to fuel the war by illicit shipments of arms into the territory?

Mr. Hain: I know of reports that show conclusively that Jonas Savimbi's UNITA organisation can sustain its murderous civil war activity, killing hundreds of thousands of people, as it has done for the past 20 years or so, only because fuel and arms are flown in, often with the connivance of the countries around Angola.

I am also aware of the allegations in respect of Zambia and Uganda. I have raised those with the Zambian Foreign Minister and the President of Uganda, and both have assured me that they will take any evidence that is given to them very seriously, because UNITA must be starved of its capacity to wage that war.

I am also aware of Ukrainian pilots flying in supplies. That must be stopped, and I look to the Ukrainian Government to take immediate action to stop it.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): Is the Minister aware of the need, on humanitarian grounds alone, to keep some line of communication open to Jonas Savimbi and UNITA? I speak of the case—in which I have a constituency interest—of Jason Pope, a young man who was kidnapped by UNITA more than a year ago, and who has not been heard of since. I should like an assurance that the Minister is willing to speak to Mr. Pope's family and not to discount altogether the possibility of a mission by private citizens, including the family and anyone else—perhaps a Member of Parliament—to try to find that young man and return him to his family.

Mr. Hain: I very much welcome the opportunity to say that Foreign Office officials are in regular touch with

Jason Pope's family. We are very aware—I am especially aware—of the suffering that his parents have been undergoing for some time. We are doing, and shall do, all that we can to track down his whereabouts. I hope that he is still alive.

UNITA—especially its leader—is a very difficult organisation to talk to on an honest basis. Jonas Savimbi has consistently broken his word. I should like UNITA to be brought into negotiations with the Government of Angola to achieve a peaceful settlement to the awful crisis and long-standing war, but it is difficult to envisage that happening with him at its head.

Mr. Bruce Grocott (Telford): I welcome everything that my hon. Friend has said, but does he agree that, sadly, there is nothing new about the present situation in that, whenever there has been a possibility of peace in Angola, the intransigence of UNITA has been the stumbling block? Given that, if that country had not been plagued by war and violence, it would have the potential to become one of the richest countries in Africa, does my hon. Friend agree that the whole international community should redouble its efforts to bring peace to that troubled country?

Mr. Hain: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. The scandal is that, although Angola has the capacity to feed the whole of southern Africa and to become a really rich and prosperous country, contributing to Africa's renaissance with its vast natural resources in oil, gas and diamonds, it has been plagued by a dreadful civil war, waged by UNITA, previously supported by the CIA and the South Africans—although, thankfully, no longer.

We must act firmly and toughly against those who are supplying UNITA with fuel and munitions. United Nations sanctions are in place. Ambassador Fowler is doing an excellent job. However, it is time that we had action from the countries that are able to influence UNITA's supplies, and we in Britain have stepped up our campaign to ensure that that happens.

China

8. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of his policy of quiet diplomacy with the Chinese authorities. [99950]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): We are continually assessing the effectiveness of our policy towards China, especially in the field of human rights.

Mr. Baker: I believe that the Government are acting from the best of motives—as was the Minister's predecessor, the excellent Derek Fatchett—but I have to say that the policy of quiet diplomacy has failed. Repression in Tibet, far from disappearing, has intensified in recent years. It is now a criminal offence to have a Tibetan flag—even in this country it is difficult, these days—or to have a picture of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader. The youngest political prisoner in the world, the Panchen Lama, is being held by the Chinese authorities and no access to him is allowed. Is it not clear that the policy of quiet diplomacy has, sadly, failed, and that it is time for the UK and other western countries to start talking tough with Beijing?

Mr. Battle: I do not accept that the policy has failed. Since we undertook the policy of dialogue with China on human rights, China has signed the UN covenant on economic, social and cultural rights in October 1997 and the UN covenant on civil and political rights in October 1998. There have been visits to China by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, in September 1998 and by the working group on arbitrary detention in November 1997. There was also the EU troika ambassadors' visit to Tibet in May 1998. That is some progress, and I think that the special rapporteur on torture will visit China next year.

On Tibet, I recently visited Beijing and I met the Minister and Vice-Minister, whom I asked directly about the Dalai Lama's choice of Panchen Lama, not least because there had been rumours that the Panchen Lama had died and had been cremated. I asked for permission to send in visitors to verify that he was still alive and I pressed them to provide a written assurance that he was still alive. I am glad to say—perhaps it is only a small matter—that we received that assurance and we made sure that it received public press coverage as well. We can move forward, albeit slowly because we face tremendous challenges. I share the hon. Gentleman's aims, but we have got to keep pressing.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Through diplomacy, will my hon. Friend also ensure that the agreements over Hong Kong are not eroded and that freedom of press in Hong Kong will continue?

Mr. Battle: The answer is yes. I was recently in Hong Kong, where I met members of non-governmental organisations, human rights groups and representatives of political groups, including opposition and governing groups. We shall continue to work with them to ensure that human rights and freedom of expression are respected. I was pleased, when I visited Hong Kong, that I was thanked by a member of a leading human rights non-governmental organisation for my help in securing the safe return of Lee Cheuk Yan to Hong Kong some years ago. I was surprised by that when I walked into the room, but we shall continue to work with such groups to ensure that there is proper freedom of expression in Hong Kong. That was part of the agreement at the handover, and it will remain part of it.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): We welcome any progress but, as has been said, treaties are often forgotten. Does the Minister therefore accept that there needs to be a constant watch on what is happening in China and Tibet? Will he be able to press for an open parliamentary visit to Tibet so that we can see for ourselves what is happening?

Mr. Battle: I know that the hon. Gentleman takes a strong interest in Tibet and has done so for many years. I met the all-party group on Tibet in the House a few days ago. When I was in Beijing, I asked the Chinese authorities whether it was not time to allow and enable an all-party group of Members of Parliament to visit Tibet. I was told that that would not be likely because the

authorities were rather worried that the representatives on the delegation could be suspicious characters. I reminded the Chinese that the all-party group would be elected Members of the House and, therefore, had a right to go. I am confident that we can continue to press for an all-party group of Members of the House to visit Tibet, and I hope that that will be next year.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): The real question is whether the Minister is a fit person to be in charge of diplomacy, quiet or otherwise. On 5 November, the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), in a written answer confirmed to the House that 15 people had been arrested in connection with the visit of the President of China. Some two weeks later, on 22 November, the Minister told the House that no one had been arrested. Either the Minister did not know, or he misled the House. He should tell us now and, if he did either, he should resign.

Mr. Battle: I have corrected the record as a result of the misunderstanding that arose on 22 November when I said—I shall read out the record—that no one was "arrested or charged". I meant "arrested and charged". I will concede that a few people were arrested, and that is what the Home Office said. However, no one was charged during the visit, and that is the primary point. That is what I said, but I am happy to put the record right for a slip of the tongue. Whether I am a fit person to do the job is, I am grateful to say, not the hon. Lady's decision; it will remain a decision for those on the Labour Benches.

Sierra Leone

9. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): If he will make a statement on the funding of the peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone. [99952]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): The United Nations peacekeeping operation in Sierra Leone will be funded by the assessed contributions of member states. The United Kingdom is also providing 15 military observers and eight specialist military personnel.

The United Kingdom has already provided £27 million for humanitarian needs and the disarmament process and we are also contributing £10 million to support the troops of ECOMOG and for the training of an army for the Government of Sierra Leone. No other nation from outside the region has contributed as much as the UK to the reconstruction of Sierra Leone and to enabling its people, once again, to live under a freely elected Government.

Mr. George: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that reply. I know that he accepts that the situation in Sierra Leone is dire. Innocent civilians there simply want security, and that has not been achieved. What international efforts are the Government making with the countries of the European Union, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations to ensure that there is adequate funding for the DDR—disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration—programme and rapid deployment of the necessary peacekeeping forces, which are now so urgently required?

Mr. Cook: I discussed those questions with President Kabbah and President Obasanjo in Durban last month, and I wholeheartedly echo the hon. Gentleman's point. To speak to anybody who has seen the problems at first hand, such as the children who have had their arms lopped off by the rebels, is to understand the degree of human suffering that will be visited on Sierra Leone for decades to come, as a result of the brutality of the past two years.

Sierra Leone, rightly and justifiably, looks to Britain to be its voice in many of those international forums. Britain took the lead in achieving the resolution on Sierra Leone in the Security Council, and we are now working hard to make sure that the troops required for that mission to succeed are provided. In particular, we shall be in contact with other donor countries to make sure that they match our contributions to the process of disarmament, so that we can take advantage of those people who are coming out of the bush, seeking to disarm and to be retrained.

India

10. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): If he will make a statement on the recent visit to India by the Minister of State. [99953]

17. **Mr. Michael J. Foster** (Worcester): If he will make a statement on the United Kingdom's relations with India. [99961]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): At the request of the Prime Minister, I visited India last month to open a new chapter in our relations with India, and I had excellent discussions with Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Vajpayee. We agreed on a new partnership of equals between our countries, including an alliance between our information technology sectors.

Dr. Iddon: India is often criticised for not allowing foreign politicians, non-governmental organisations—especially Amnesty International—and the wider media free access to Jammu and Kashmir. Certainly during a visit to Islamabad and Azad Kashmir this summer, a group of Labour Members of Parliament felt that criticism strongly, but when we put that to the Foreign and Home Secretaries in New Delhi, we got the opposite point of view. Did my hon. Friend have similar discussions during his recent visit to India, and if so, what were his impressions?

Mr. Hain: I did, indeed, have such discussions, and I specifically raised with leading members of the Indian Government the desire of NGOs and British Members of Parliament to visit Kashmir. They are now much more sympathetic to that idea, and we want to explore that with them. It is in India's interests to make sure that human rights are respected in Kashmir, and for that reason I raised with them the imprisonment of virtually the entire Kashmiri leadership, which is not a good advertisement for India's policy on Kashmir.

I must, however, point out that India is on the receiving end of cross-border terrorism, which we strongly condemn, and we want to work with the Indian Government to prevent that. They have shown great restraint over Pakistani attacks, especially at Kargil earlier this year.

Mr. Foster: I recently held a meeting with Worcester's ethnic minority consultative forum, at which its members related to me their fears about the situation in Kashmir. Next time that my hon. Friend meets representatives of the Indian Government, will he impress on them the strength of feelings expressed at that forum, which seeks a peaceful, lasting solution to the problem in Kashmir which is acceptable to the people of Kashmir?

Mr. Hain: I am aware of the excellent work that my hon. Friend does in his constituency with that forum, and the way in which he allows it to express its views, which we all value. We will indeed continue to press for the case for resuming close negotiations between Delhi and Islamabad, as soon as that is possible following the Pakistani coup. I understand the difficulties of proceeding to that point overnight, but it is absolutely imperative that India and Pakistan together negotiate an equitable and lasting solution to the Kashmiri crisis, which otherwise will continue to be a very dangerous flash-point in the region.

Poland

11. **Mrs. Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton): If he will make a statement on relations with Poland. [99954]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): Our relations with Poland are excellent. Poland is the largest of the EU accession states, and our most important trading partner in central and eastern Europe. We warmly welcomed Poland's membership of NATO in March 1999, and strongly support Poland's application to join the EU.

Mrs. Gilroy: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I think that it will be warmly welcomed by the thousands of Polish people who have made their homes in and around Plymouth because of the close association between the city and the second world war. Underpinning that is a strong twinning arrangement with the naval port of Gdynia and some extremely interesting exchanges recently dealing with football hooliganism, community safety and tackling drug abuse. Does my hon. Friend share my hope that such exchanges will go from strength to strength as Poland approaches membership of the EU? Will he say something about the importance that he attaches to ministerial exchanges at national level to facilitate that?

Mr. Vaz: I fully support my hon. Friend's comments. The United Kingdom wants Poland to be part of the EU. It is a country of 40 million people and, as my hon. Friend has correctly said, there are strong historical ties between our country and Poland. Five days after I was appointed Minister with responsibilities for Europe, I went to Poland. I visited Warsaw and I launched a bilateral action plan. I was pleased to learn that more than £100 million-worth of know-how fund assistance has been given to Poland. Another six of my ministerial colleagues have visited Poland recently, including my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. We want to ensure that we keep these contacts going until Poland joins the EU, and we hope that that will be as soon as possible.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Will the Minister take this opportunity to praise the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), who always argued for the broadening of Europe as opposed to the deepening of the European Union? Does he agree with me that if Poland is to accede to the EU—I believe that the whole House wishes that it does so—we shall first have to ensure that the common agricultural policy is revised considerably?

Mr. Vaz: I certainly support the view that Europe should be as wide as possible, and that is why the United Kingdom has been in the lead on enlargement, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said earlier this afternoon. Obviously, Poland will have to negotiate to join the EU. I am pleased to say that 23 of the 31 chapters of the acquis have been opened. Agriculture is a matter that will be considered. I am certain that the negotiations will be fair and will give the best possible deal for Poland and the EU.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Will the Minister remind the House, in view of earlier questions, that the omission of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic from the European Union is a moral issue and, but for Yalta, they would not only be members of the EU but would have been in at its formation?

In view of my hon. Friend's comments about the importance to the United Kingdom of trade, is he aware that, in relation to Poland, we are far behind some of our principal European competitors? Will he have a private word with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and remind him that my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett), when she was Secretary of State, went to the important market of Australasia, and that when my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) was Secretary of State, he went to the important marketplace of south America? Neither of them went to Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia or Slovakia, which are the principal front-rank applicants for membership of the EU, and nor has the present Secretary of State.

Although United Kingdom commerce and trade and industry are making big inroads in Poland, we are not doing sufficient, particularly in the banking and finance sectors, where we have particular skills. Will my hon. Friend ask my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to go to Poland, bearing in mind that other Heads of Government have been there, not just once, but twice or three times?

Mr. Vaz: I realise that my hon. Friend was in Poland over the weekend. A visit from him is worth a visit from three Cabinet Ministers. I can assure him that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was disappointed to have to postpone his visit last year at very short notice, which my hon. Friend knows was due to Northern Ireland business. I know that my right hon. Friend hopes to be there at some time in the near future.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade was in Poland in September to launch the Opportunity Poland campaign. Bilateral trade in 1998 was worth £1.9 billion. As my hon. Friend knows, almost £2 billion of British investment goes into Poland. I can assure him that all his points have been well taken. I am glad that so many of my ministerial colleagues have visited Poland. I will pass the message on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Who knows, even my hon. Friend may decide to visit again in the near future.

EU Reform

12. **Mr. Peter Atkinson** (Hexham): If he will make a statement on the agenda for the Council at Helsinki in relation to proposals to reform Community institutions. [99955]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): As I said earlier, we expect Helsinki to agree to an intergovernmental conference to prepare the European Union for the challenges of enlargement. In Britain's view, the essential reforms are to limit the growth in the number of Commissioners and to achieve a fairer weight of votes for the larger members.

We are willing to look at an extension of qualified majority voting on a case-by-case basis. Where QMV may be in Britain's interests, we will support it, but where key areas of national interest are at stake, such as treaty change, border controls, defence, taxation, social security and own resources, we will insist on retaining unanimity.

Mr. Atkinson: Will the Foreign Secretary take a firmer line on the extension of qualified majority voting? Surely the intergovernmental conference next year should concentrate on enlargement and on building a wider and more flexible Europe, and should not fiddle with details that can be left for a future occasion?

Mr. Cook: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the IGC should focus on enlargement, and that is what we will argue at Helsinki. However, at Cologne, the three issues that were identified as relevant to enlargement are the three that I set out to the House. There may well be occasions when it would be in our interest to argue for qualified majority voting—for instance, we want reform of the European Court of Justice, and I understand that the Opposition do as well. It will be more difficult to achieve that, so long as every single member state has a block on reform.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if we are to achieve enlargement of the European Union, that must be on a basis on which the institutions of the EU can work? It is therefore necessary to deal with the problem of the number of members of the Commission, and the issues of majority voting and languages. Those issues are fundamental to the efficient working of the EU. Is it not absurd for the Conservatives to claim that they want enlargement, but to do everything to stop the means that make it possible?

Mr. Cook: I addressed that question in the earlier intervention. The Opposition must decide whether they are in favour of enlargement, or whether they want to block the treaty.

On my hon. Friend's point, it is important that we get those changes. It is particularly important that we make sure that the Commission does not become so large that it becomes ineffective. We are therefore willing to concede Britain's second Commissioner, but only if we get adequate reweighting of the votes in the Council of Ministers. That is a fair package, which I hope that all member states will accept.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): Will the Secretary of State address himself to the matter of flexibility in the Government's position? Can he confirm to the House that the Government ruled out any discussion of flexibility on the IGC agenda? Can he also confirm that the Government are opposed to any extension of section 43 of the Amsterdam treaty covering closer co-operation? If that is the case, will he disown the Labour MEPs who voted in the European Parliament in favour of the European Parliament's own resolution on the subject and who seem to favour greater flexibility, alongside the Conservatives?

Mr. Cook: In the context of the IGC, I stated clearly to the House last week, and I repeat, that, if this IGC is to reach agreement, it will have to focus on enlargement and achieve its target of being completed in time for 2002.

On flexibility, no, we do not share the view of Opposition Members who want to achieve a pick-and-choose Europe. Such a view is not supported by the applicant countries either. One of the reasons why, at Amsterdam, we were adamant that there should be a veto on any flexibility provision was to prevent other countries forging ahead and leaving us behind. We secured that veto. I was rather surprised to note that, in the hon. Gentleman's speech earlier this week, he seemed to suggest that the Conservatives were in favour of abandoning that veto.

China

13. **Mr. Bill O'Brien** (Normanton): If he will make a statement on the United Kingdom's current relations with China; and what assistance his Department is giving to promote trade with China. [99956]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): China is an important and growing presence in the world. It has the largest population and is the seventh largest economy in the world. The United Kingdom is the sixth largest investor in China and we share extensive international interests and responsibilities, especially as permanent members of the UN Security Council. It is right that we should seek

to expand our dialogue and draw China more closely into the international political and trade mechanisms for solving problems and disputes.

Mr. O'Brien: Will my hon. Friend take it from me that the general view throughout the United Kingdom, in west Yorkshire in particular, is that stronger industrial trade links need to be developed with China, and that, through business, universities and local authorities, we could do more trade in printing, packaging, health products, engineering and other manufacturing, textiles and garments, and tourism? Will my hon. Friend take note of the views expressed by some of those who have visited China about the need to develop trade links? Such links could move the human rights programme even further forward to bring China nearer to the views of the western world. Will my hon. Friend work with the local authorities, business people and universities to improve trade links with China?

Mr. Battle: Yes, promoting trade with China is a priority and we have mutual interests in key areas of business which we can develop, including the sectors that my hon. Friend mentions, such as engineering, new technology, textiles and the utilities. We are also expanding our diplomatic presence, opening a new consulate general in Chongqing early next year in the south-west region of China. Some local authorities are already engaged there, where we will be the first serious European presence. Trade is an essential part of the process of engagement with China. Economic contact and exchange can play an important part in modernising China and bringing about an improvement in human rights.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): On page 27 of the Foreign Office's annual report on human rights, it clearly states that China's

"arrest and trial of pro-democracy campaigners at the end of 1998 was unacceptable."

It continues:

"the Chinese authorities should not view the peaceful expression of political views as a threat to state security".

Why, then, was the Chinese human rights campaigner, Wei Jing Shen, who did nothing other than unfurl a pro-democracy banner outside Buckingham palace, arrested? Why, when the Minister was questioned about it, did he state in a written reply:

"no one was arrested . . . charged or countercharged."?—[*Official Report*, 22 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 378.]

Why was that, and will the Minister not now reconsider his position?

Mr. Battle: I have answered those questions in detail. My written answer of 6 December states:

"Following a further review, I am now able to give figures for arrests for activities related to the State Visit . . . As I made clear in the Debate on the Address, no-one was charged. As the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) said . . . 15 people were arrested in the Metropolitan Police Area . . . one person was arrested in the City of London. There were no arrests in Cambridge. I reconfirm that no one was charged in any of these police areas."—[*Official Report*, 6 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 412W.]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), met the person in question during the state visit. We continue to share serious concerns about human rights and are vigorously pursuing such cases with the Chinese authorities, and we shall continue to do so. The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) has spent the past 10 minutes passing notes back to the hon. Gentleman to prompt him to ask the question.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): The Minister may not be aware that granite imported from China is currently being used to refurbish the Royal Mile in Edinburgh—not that Scotland has run out of granite. How easy is it for local authorities responsible for purchasing such material to assure themselves that its cheap price is not the result of poor labour conditions in China?

Mr. Battle: There is a forum for raising precisely such questions, not least the International Labour Organisation. Some local authorities have relationships with China. Twin towns, cities and regions provide a context for such dialogue, but it is up to local authorities to negotiate their individual trade deals. I do not know anything about the particular one that the hon. Gentleman mentions. I am not sure why granite has to be taken to Scotland. However, the hon. Gentleman has made his point and we shall continue to ensure that the terms of trade are fair and just.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): What interpretation does my hon. Friend put on the build-up of military forces on the Chinese mainland opposite Taiwan?

Mr. Battle: We are watching that situation with urgent concern because, in the past, there have been belligerent noises. We expressed our views in the proper way at the time, and we shall keep the situation under close observation.

Single European Market

14. **Mr. Eric Forth** (Bromley and Chislehurst): When he next plans to meet the German Chancellor to discuss the European single market; and if he will make a statement. [99957]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has no plans to meet the German Chancellor to discuss the single market.

The single market has created a wider market for United Kingdom goods, comprising 380 million consumers and constituting 40 per cent. of world trade. Such a huge market gives consumers greater choice, and the greater competition and liberalisation of the single market has helped to achieve lower prices. The single market provides for better consumer protection; gives United Kingdom citizens the right to work, study or retire in all the other member states; and has significantly reduced export bureaucracy for business.

The Government have provided significant input into the Commission's new single market strategy, which is due to be endorsed by the Helsinki summit. The strategy reflects United Kingdom priorities for the single market, including utilities legislation.

Mr. Forth: I welcome the Minister back to Westminster from his bus trip, with his funny friend,

to try to stir up Euro-fanaticism among the excited population. However, why has the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs chosen not to have any discussions with the German Chancellor on the single market? On the face of it, it seems that German companies are rightly free to come here and, when the market thinks it appropriate, to take over British companies, whereas the German Chancellor seems perversely to take the view that United Kingdom companies should have no reciprocal right to take over, or merge with, German companies. Does the Minister think that that is not only a bit peculiar and unbalanced, but a direct violation of the single market which he has just been so lavishly praising?

Mr. Vaz: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind comments about my bus. I am sorry that he was not able to join us—some Conservative party members were on the Eurobus with us, and it was an enormous success. His comments on the single market dealt with commercial matters, and decisions on them will have to be made commercially between companies. The Government have no intention of interfering in those commercial decisions.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I have listened carefully to my hon. Friend's comments. However, in my constituency, the reality is that a number of major German companies have taken over the largest employers, including Rolls-Royce motors. That could be said to be a commercial matter, and there were no political objections to it, but some of us might have liked to have seen rather more effort going into objections. However, that did not happen. Is my hon. Friend aware that that is not the case in the response of German Ministers?

Mr. Vaz: I can assure my hon. Friend that the United Kingdom benefits enormously from being part of the single market. There are 700,000 British businesses in the European Union. It is also very important that we should understand that 3.5 million jobs are dependent on us being involved and being part of the single market and the European Union, and that we shall continue to prosper for being part of it.

Iran

16. **Mr. Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): What plans his Department has to improve Britain's relations with Iran; and if he will make a statement. [99960]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Our policy is to encourage the reforms already under way in Iran while pressing for improvements in those Iranian policies that are of concern. We hope that the Iranian Foreign Minister, Dr. Kharazzi, will visit in the new year, and that the Foreign Secretary will visit Iran in the spring. The permanent under-secretary for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office visited Tehran on 28 November.

Mr. Brake: I thank the Minister for his response. When he is having discussions with the Iranian authorities, will he consider the fate of the 13 members of the Jewish community who are detained in Iran? Will he also perhaps raise some very specific issues—such as whether the prisoners are in fact being given access to their families and to kosher food; whether the prisoners will have access to adequate legal representation, if there is a trial; and whether international observers will be allowed at any trial?

Mr. Hain: Those points are very well made, and taken. We are very concerned about the plight of the 13 Jewish detainees. We do not want them to be scapegoats, and they must experience fair and open proceedings, preferably with international observers. We have repeatedly raised that issue with the Iranian Government. We feel that the reform programme that President Khatami has initiated, and the diplomatic engagement with the Iranians with which we are now proceeding, will allow those points to be taken on board. I certainly hope that, whatever proceedings take place affecting the detainees, there are no severe punishments for anyone concerned and certainly no executions.

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): Many of my constituents are members of the Baha'i community. They regularly raise with me their anxieties about the Iranian Government's persecution of, and discrimination against, members of the Baha'i faith in Iran. Will the Minister give an assurance that, during the visits that he announced for early next year, the concerns and human rights of members of the Baha'i community in Iran are raised at the highest level, and that the Iranian Government are urged to treat them fairly and equally?

Mr. Hain: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. We have already raised those matters with the Iranian Government at the highest level. It is important that those of us in the west who have had difficult relations with Iran in the past encourage the process of change and reform that President Khatami is leading. It is in the interests of the Iranian people and of regional stability—and, indeed, that of the world—for the reform programme to succeed. I am sure that respect for the human rights of the Baha'is and others will help the success of that programme.

Chechnya

21. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): What discussions he has had with the Government of Russia concerning the war in Chechnya. [99966]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): The Russian ambassador was summoned to the Foreign Office this morning. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), asked him to convey to Moscow the alarm and dismay of the United Kingdom and its partners at the recent turn of events in Chechnya.

I wholeheartedly condemn yesterday's ultimatum to the residents of Grozny to flee or be destroyed. We have, with our partners, repeatedly recorded our concern at the effect of the military offensive on the civilian population. We would deplore any action to intensify rather than limit that military offensive.

I spoke to the Russian Foreign Minister last Friday, when I pressed him for an early date for a visit to the region by the chairman-in-office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. I was pleased that, over the weekend, Mr. Ivanov agreed that the visit could take place next week, but it is harder to envisage positive prospects for the OSCE's attempt to establish a political process if the military violence continues to escalate.

We have sought a closer working relationship through dialogue with Russia. It is in Europe's interest that we should help create a democratic and stable Russia that is engaged with the outside world. That must remain the right strategic goal for our policy on Russia, but we cannot continue to assist Russia if Russia does not respect basic humanitarian norms.

If Russia proceeds with its threat to Grozny on Saturday, we will expect the Helsinki Council to consider the future of the assistance to Russia under the TACIS programme, which provides technical and financial help for the modernisation of the society and the economy in Russia.

Yesterday, the International Monetary Fund management decided not to recommend disbursement of the next £400 million tranche to Russia. In the current circumstances, I welcome that decision.

Britain understands that Russia has legitimate concerns about terrorism and violent crime in Chechnya, but we cannot understand how Russia imagines that it can root out terrorism by attacking a whole population. We appeal to Russia not to escalate its military campaign in a way that will further undermine its relations with the outside world and further damage its own national interests.

Mr. Robertson: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that reply. However, does he share my alarm at the deterioration of the situation since he spoke to Foreign Minister Ivanov? There has been further aggression, and there are predictions that the war could last for many months. The citizens of Grozny have been told to leave by Saturday. The Foreign Secretary acknowledged that that was unacceptable, and I am sure that he knows that many people in Grozny cannot leave—many are old or sick, or terrified of leaving the city in case they are caught up in the bombing. The Russian authorities' promise of a safe corridor is worthless. Will he convey to the Russian authorities in even stronger terms—such as those that he used to the authorities in Kosovo—the seriousness of the situation?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman should be in no doubt about the strength with which my hon. Friend the Minister of State and I have expressed our views to Russian Ministers. While we do not have information on the ground, many thousands of civilians must still be sheltering in Grozny. Many of them will be elderly or vulnerable; for them, escape by foot in winter conditions is simply not practical. In those circumstances, we believe that the Russians must withdraw their threat; to persist with it would clearly breach humanitarian obligations.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): The whole House will welcome my right hon. Friend's robust statement. We are all casting around for instruments that might have some effect on the inhuman course of action pursued by the Russian Government. The withdrawal of the tranche by the IMF may not amount to much, because it affects only whether money is transferred from one account to another in Washington. When Russia entered the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, it gave clear undertakings about its human rights obligations. It appears to be in breach of those undertakings. Is it my right hon. Friend's view that the Council of Europe should reconsider its position and possibly suspend Russia?

Mr. Cook: We are awaiting the report of Mr. Gil-Robles, the rapporteur, who went to Chechnya and the surrounding area on 2 and 3 December to report on conditions there. It is certainly a requirement of membership of the Council of Europe to observe standards of humanitarian behaviour and minority rights. It is for the Council of Europe, and for us as a member of it, to consider the report carefully.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): We share the Foreign Secretary's concern over the Russians' brutal tactics in Chechnya. The deaths, destruction and suffering that result are on an unacceptable scale. We agree with the Foreign Secretary that the threat to bomb civilians who stay in Grozny this weekend is appalling.

I was interested to hear the right hon. Gentleman say that the next tranche of money for the TACIS programme might be suspended. Have there been discussions with our allies about the possibility of other measures being taken to persuade the Russians to change what they are doing? What humanitarian relief is the international community able to provide? In the context of his ethical foreign policy, how would the Foreign Secretary explain to a Chechen refugee the difference between what the Russians are doing in Chechnya and what Milosevic did in Kosovo?

Mr. Cook: We vigorously condemn what the Russians are doing in Chechnya and we vigorously condemned what Milosevic did in Kosovo. We are seeking in every possible way to provide humanitarian aid to the victims of that brutality and persecution. It is not easy to get aid through. We have made a £500,000 donation to the Red Cross effort and we are considering what contribution we can make to the UN agencies. In the meantime, I continue to press Mr. Ivanov to ensure that the international

[Mr. Cook]

humanitarian agencies have full access to the refugees inside and outside Chechnya. We shall be considering what further measures can be taken with our close allies over the next 24 hours. I have already discussed the issue with Madeleine Albright.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): No one can have any illusions about the forces who are fighting the Russians. I am sure that my right hon. Friend remembers the savage beheading of three British citizens and one New Zealander. However, does my right hon. Friend recognise how deeply shocked those of us who accept the legitimacy of what the Russians are trying to do are by their brutal indifference to the sufferings of civilians in the area? If my right hon. Friend, together with the United States and others, can communicate that to the leadership of Russia, perhaps it will do some good.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the terrorist and brutal violent crimes that have given rise to Russia's serious and legitimate concerns about the situation in Chechnya. Five British citizens have been kidnapped over the past year and three of them have been brutally murdered. Like my hon. Friend, I find it hard to understand how the current military offensive will tackle that problem. If one wants to defeat terrorism, one has to isolate the terrorists. My anxiety is that the behaviour of the Russian military in Chechnya is likely to create a radicalised younger generation who may well be more readily recruited as terrorists.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Is not the unpalatable and perhaps embarrassing truth that we—I do not exempt myself or my party from this criticism—have been silent for too long in the face of the mediaeval barbarism being inflicted by the Russian Government on the citizens of Chechnya? Is it not an outrage to issue an ultimatum involving a blanket threat, with the prospect of a blanket attack on civilians, many of whom are too old, too ill and too frightened to escape? If the Russians persist in their brutal treatment of innocent civilians in Chechnya, will the Government consider all possible political, diplomatic and economic responses?

Mr. Cook: I absolutely agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman's characterisation of the threat to the residents of Grozny. I have seen the text of the leaflet, which says that those who remain will be viewed as terrorists and bandits; they will be destroyed by artillery and aviation. The people to whom that is addressed include thousands of elderly and vulnerable people who cannot do anything about that threat—they cannot leave by Saturday.

I do not accept that we have been silent on the issue. We have repeatedly recorded our concern, and I have expressed it personally to Mr. Ivanov on a number of occasions. However, I would accept that obviously we have failed to get that message across. Therefore, we must consider stronger ways of doing so, consistent with maintaining what must be a strategic priority—to maintain the dialogue that we need to help create a democratic and stable Russia.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Should we not be a little candid with each other? Where did the Russians get the idea that high-altitude bombing, to save casualties at home and political embarrassment, might be a way of conducting modern warfare? Where did they get the idea of a military offensive against civilian populations? It could not have been, could it, from NATO—from the marketplace at Nis, from Zastava, from Pancevo and from the centre of Belgrade? In any talks, ought not we to be candid about the fact that NATO has at least given them the excuse to do these terrible things?

Mr. Cook: I would wholly repudiate any parallelism between the conduct of the Russian military in Chechnya and the NATO bombing in the context of Kosovo. I point out to my hon. Friend that at least 300,000 Chechens—probably more—have been rendered refugees and displaced people by the action of the Russian military. In Kosovo, 800,000 people were driven out of Kosovo not by NATO, but by the forces of Belgrade. Those 800,000 people would still be in tents in Macedonia and Albania if we had followed my hon. Friend's advice.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): May I express my appreciation to the Foreign Secretary for coming to the House to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) on this grave crisis, which may yet prove to be the touchstone of the Foreign Secretary's ethical foreign policy? Can he assure the House that, at the forthcoming European summit in Helsinki, he will allow not just token measures to be applied, but the most rigorous sanctions? Is it not the case that, if the Russians get away with indiscriminate mass murder—as they are perpetrating now—they will be encouraged to assert themselves and throw their weight around not only within the federation but, potentially, outside it? When the Foreign Secretary looks at the question of a stable Russia, will he take into account the fact that this must mean fulfilling the aspirations and special needs of particular peoples within the federation in a flexible manner?

Mr. Cook: We respect the integrity of the Russian Federation, and nobody is seeking to change that. Part of the conditions for membership of the Council of Europe—of which Russia is a member—is respect for those minority rights. If this threat is carried out on Saturday, the European Council—which will be meeting that day in Helsinki—must respond with those measures that are available to it.

I have indicated that we will be asking the European Union to consider the future of the technical and financial help that we provide to Russia. I stress that not all of that is available to be withdrawn without damaging our national interest. Part of it, for instance, helps fund the destruction of chemical weapons within Russia. We are not going to withdraw that programme. However, we must look clearly and firmly at how we can indicate our dismay and alarm at the current behaviour within Chechnya.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I share my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's alarm and dismay at Russia's ultimatum to the Chechen people, and say to him that I think that the bombing of civilians is always wrong. Has not NATO's illegal bombing of Yugoslavia robbed us of any moral authority to intervene on behalf of Chechens? The Russians have learned from NATO, as my

hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said: bomb from a safe distance and disregard civilians. Let us not forget that NATO bombs killed 1,500 civilians in Yugoslavia, and 4,000 were injured. People are still dying from cluster bombs dropped by NATO.

Mr. Cook: I would wholly repudiate the idea that NATO's action in Kosovo was in any way illegal. Let me say gently to my hon. Friend that, if she really wants to convey dismay and alarm to Moscow, and to be heard, she should not couple that sentiment to words that Moscow would dearly like to be said in this Chamber.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I agree with the Foreign Secretary that it is difficult to discern Russia's self-interest in its actions in Chechnya, but will he comment on Prime Minister Putin's view that it is difficult to identify a Government of any sort with whom to negotiate in Chechnya? The situation is perhaps analogous to Somalia. Will he also comment on the suggestion that the west should be enabling the international community to get at least the sick, the frail and the mentally ill out of Grozny before the Russian ultimatum expires? Does he agree that this is one of the consequences of excluding Russia from the political process when NATO decided to take its action over Kosovo?

Mr. Cook: Russia was not excluded in the political process that led to that decision; it played a full part in the contact group and at Rambouillet. Of course, we did not consult Russia about the decision taken in NATO, and I do not imagine that, on reflection, the hon. Gentleman will want to press that point.

On assisting the evacuation of Grozny, the fact is that there are very few humanitarian agencies operating in Chechnya and I do not think that we could mount such an operation by Saturday even if we took the view that it would be the right thing to do. Plainly, the correct course is for Russia to refrain from the threat that it has made, and we will continue to press for that right through to Saturday.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): As the Yeltsin regime increasingly bears less resemblance to a democratic Government than it does to the bloodthirsty tyrannies of Stalin and some of the tsars, will Her Majesty's Government take all practicable measures to avert humanitarian tragedy?

Mr. Cook: We will certainly put every possible effort into coping with the humanitarian consequences of Russia's actions and take every opportunity to ensure that it understands the international community's deep concern and the damage that it is doing to its own interests.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Is the Foreign Secretary aware that Russia is very close to political and economic disaster and that international organisations say that organised crime runs half its economy? However much many of us may worry about the wisdom of the particular Russian tactics, the sad fact is that, if the legitimate elected Government of Russia are seen to be defeated by the principal centre of organised crime within the Russian Federation, the consequences not only for Russia but for all of us are incalculable.

Mr. Cook: My difficulty with the hon. Gentleman's point is that I find it very hard to see how this exercise can end in something that can be claimed as a victory for Russia. I do not see the present strategy as rooting out the terrorists or establishing a peaceful, democratic and stable Chechnya as part of the Russian Federation. That is why those of us who wish Russia well would like to see a change in its strategy towards Chechnya.

Rural Development

3.48 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): With permission, Madam Speaker, I am this afternoon announcing a radical redirection of support for agriculture and a significant increase in expenditure on rural development measures under the European Union rural development regulation—the second pillar of the common agricultural policy.

My decisions follow the comprehensive consultation launched in January with farming, rural, environmental and other interests over how to implement in the United Kingdom the common agricultural policy reforms then under negotiation. The Government are committed to reforming agricultural supports so that they are less distortionary and more closely reflect the public benefits that agriculture provides. We want to offer farmers constructive help to enhance and diversify their businesses in response to changing market circumstances.

The new rural development regulation, promoted under the United Kingdom presidency, provides member states with a range of measures, jointly funded with the European Union, to advance environmentally beneficial farming practices, to modernise and restructure their farming industries and to support off-farm rural development. That is an important part of the Government's rural policy, and has been developed in collaboration with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and the environment and countryside agencies.

Our plans for the seven-year period are ambitious. For England it will mean a total of £1.6 billion in expenditure, a 60 per cent. increase over seven years. We have given priority to involving our English regional partners, and the plan will include a separate section for each region, setting out locally identified priorities. The devolved Administrations will set out their own plans for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Four sources of revenue will cover the increased expenditure. The first source is the funding that my Department already allocates to existing schemes that will become part of the rural development regulation. Similar budgets are held in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The second source will be the European Union's allocation of funds for the rural development regulation. The EU's initial contribution to the United Kingdom amounts to some £100 million a year. That figure disappointingly reflects the low historic level of expenditure on rural development inherited from the previous Government. I achieved, through negotiation, a 30 per cent. increase, and intend to press for a further increase for the UK when the allocations of EU rural development funding are reviewed in 2002.

The third source of funding will be the redirection, or modulation, into the RDR of a small percentage of the £1.6 billion in direct production subsidies paid to UK farmers under the CAP commodity regimes. In 2001, 2.5 per cent. of payments will be modulated; that will rise to 3 per cent. in 2002, 3.5 per cent. in 2003 and 2004, and 4.5 per cent. in 2005 and 2006. Modulation will apply at a flat rate and to all direct subsidies to farmers under the CAP. All of that money will be redirected to expenditure through the rural development regulation.

The fourth source of funding will be the full match funding by the Government of the modulated element. In other words, each £1 redirected, or modulated, to the rural development regulation will be matched by an additional £1 of new expenditure from the Government.

Together, those four sources will result in substantial extra funds for environmental benefits and farm diversification. Total expenditure on rural development will rise to £295 million for England in 2006-07, and over the whole seven-year period will be around £1.6 billion.

Expenditure plans for England have yet to be finalised and there is of course room for some flexibility. However, the House will want to know that I plan to allocate over the lifetime of the plan the following indicative amounts, starting with £1 billion for agri-environmental schemes. By 2006–07, spending on agri-environment will be double the current level. Of that £1 billion, I plan to allocate around £500 million for the countryside stewardship scheme, a scheme open across England that pays farmers to bring about environmental improvements. I plan to allocate around £140 million for organic farm conversion.

In addition, I plan to allocate £85 million for woodlands on farms, and a £22 million increase in the woodland grant scheme; more than £40 million to encourage better marketing and processing of agricultural products; around £30 million for the growing of energy crops; and more than £20 million in aid for training to improve the skills of farmers and farm workers relating to environmental land management and other aspects of diversification

I also plan to allocate around £150 million for a new rural enterprise scheme to promote rural development on and off the farm. The rural enterprise scheme will complement the new enterprise grants scheme, which was announced in July by my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, although the rural enterprise scheme is not confined to assisted areas.

There will be a successor scheme to the hill livestock compensatory allowance to help hill farmers in less-favoured areas, and a consultation on the arrangements for the new scheme is under way. The normal annual review of hill farmer support will take place in the autumn and will include, among other factors, the impact of today's announcement.

The rural development regulation will include policy instruments to help farmers to enhance their farm businesses. The rural enterprise scheme, processing and marketing grants and aid for training will complement my Department's existing policies to promote farm diversification, and to encourage collaboration and innovation across the agri-food chain. All that will be of real help to new entrants, including young farmers, as they work to develop entrepreneurial farm businesses.

Further to this statement, I shall announce in a parliamentary answer the detail of changes to the administration of certain CAP commodity regimes resulting from Agenda 2000.

The rural development regulation represents the long-term future of public supports for farm businesses and the rural economy. It presents a significant opportunity for improvement of the rural environment and the countryside

landscape. It demonstrates the Government's commitment to rural communities, and it will set the agenda for further reform of the CAP in years to come.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I thank the Minister for making his statement available to me a little while before he made it here. It presents a complex package, which I hope the House will have an early opportunity to debate.

Many of the long-term aims to which the statement refers will command widespread support, but I want to ask four questions. I want to ask about the amount of money involved, the type of scheme that will be supported, the timing of the changes, and their effects on British farmers.

First, will the Minister explain more clearly than he did in his statement exactly how much new money will be involved, as opposed to cash that is moved from one pocket to another? In September, he claimed that a package was worth half a billion pounds; on examination, it turned out to contain only £1 million of new money. Following that claim, there is some cynicism in rural communities. A farmer who filled out his IACS form—the integrated administration and control system form—on the basis that Labour Ministers use for announcing spending programmes would soon find himself in jail.

Secondly, how much of the new money to be spent under the rural development regulation will actually reach farmers? How much of the total package has been funded by cuts in payments already being made to farmers? Will the Minister guarantee that other existing spending on the countryside will not be reduced when the new measures are introduced? Will the new rural enterprise scheme be controlled by the Ministry? If not, by whom will it be controlled? What proportion of the new money can be spent on article 33 measures? Is there any guarantee that support for hill farmers will at least be maintained? How many more bureaucrats will be employed to administer these schemes?

Thirdly, although we support a move towards more environmental schemes, I should like to know why the Government think that the right time to cut production payments is when farm incomes have just suffered three years of crippling falls.

Fourthly, and finally, this package does nothing to address the crisis that is destroying British livestock farming today. It does nothing for pig farmers who are wondering whether their businesses can survive beyond Christmas. It does nothing for dairy farmers who have been hit by falling prices and by a Government who let their competitors abroad have a higher milk quota when they cannot even meet home demand. It does nothing for beef farmers whose hopes of rebuilding export markets have been undermined by one Government blunder after another. It does nothing for sheep farmers on the hills whose incomes are down to £2,000 a year, and who now face more uncertainty in regard to their support payments. Does the Minister realise that unless he acts today to help Britain's livestock farmers, few of them will be around to take part in the new schemes that he has just announced?

Mr. Brown: As usual, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his general welcome for the announcement before turning to his long list of specific complaints. I tried to help him by giving him the statement in advance, and many of his questions have been answered by the statement. I shall try to do his points justice, however.

The hon. Gentleman referred to difficulties in the livestock sector. Those difficulties stem from the BSE problems that resulted in a national tragedy. As I have said before, a little humility from the party that presided over that crisis would be welcome. The livestock sector, more than any other, stands to benefit from the measures that I have announced. Even pig farmers cannot but benefit. Although they can apply for the schemes that have been announced, they are not the recipients of the payments that are being modulated.

The hon. Gentleman asked about sums for the use of article 33—I gave those figures in my statement. He also asked about control of specific schemes. I intend to involve our regional partners in the administration of the schemes. In England, the boundaries will parallel the boundaries of the Government offices for the regions. There was detailed consultation on the measures before they were drawn together for the statement.

The hon. Gentleman asked which budgets are being cut. There is no proposal in today's statement to cut any budget. The situation is quite the reverse. I have announced new money and a significant expansion of a range of regimes. The departmental element is subject to the comprehensive spending review round, but we are submitting the whole prospectus to the European Union in good faith. It is our seven-year plan.

I totally reject what the hon. Gentleman said about the farm aid package announced earlier this year. He asked how much new money was in today's statement. For every pound modulated in England, the Treasury will provide another pound of new money from new funds specifically for this scheme. The moneys for England will be spent in England; the moneys for Scotland will be spent in Scotland; the moneys for Wales will be spent in Wales; and, the moneys for Northern Ireland will be spent in Northern Ireland. Each pound modulating on a rising profile of expenditure will be matched pound for pound.

The hon. Gentleman referred to a false prospectus and Ministers in jail. In fact, a former Cabinet Minister is in jail. Another former Minister is currently before the courts in a very entertaining libel action. A political party exists that is funded by the ambassador of a foreign Government. Recently, a candidate withdrew in disgraceful circumstances from the forthcoming election for a mayor of London. None of those individuals has anything to do with the governing party.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): I welcome absolutely everything that my right hon. Friend has said. He is clearly listening to the true voice of the countryside. Does he agree that rural parish and town councils have a crucial role to play in assessing and developing the needs of their local communities in order to produce plans that can be funded under these excellent initiatives?

Mr. Brown: That is true. I am keen to ensure that schemes and regional priorities, which will differ in different parts of the country, reflect the ambitions of individual communities, particularly the agricultural communities most closely affected. I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome for today's announcement.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I, too, broadly welcome the proposals. Of course, the Liberal Democrats have been advocating many of them for some

[Mr. Colin Breed]

time. Nevertheless, we have two concerns. First, we are concerned that the administrative systems often become very bureaucratic. We would not want more civil servants operating or administering the system in Whitehall than there are farmers implementing it on the ground. The proposals need to be user friendly, openly acceptable and understandable; and the decision making will, we hope, be swift.

Secondly, we are a little surprised that there is no mention of an early retirement scheme. We applaud the Minister's view that there need to be fresh faces and fresh thinking in farming at this time. We would have liked some proposal for such a scheme. Will the Minister consider that and come back at some stage during this Session to find out whether an early retirement scheme for farmers may be possible?

Mr. Brown: What the hon. Gentleman says about the Liberal Democrat party having advocated these measures for some time is right. Previous Liberal Democrat agriculture spokesmen have advanced those arguments to me. I have given the indicative figures for the scheme spend. Of course, I hope to keep the administration as accessible as possible and the costs to a minimum.

The hon. Gentleman rightly asks about an early retirement scheme. As he and others who have followed these debates will know, I am a strong supporter of such a scheme, if we can get one to work and to be value for money. We have tried hard to shape such a scheme, but we have not succeeded. Therefore, it is not part of the package that I have announced and I cannot hold out any prospects for it, for England at any rate. It is better to say so clearly now so that there will be no expectations about such a scheme in the future, as I do not think that it will be possible.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): I welcome today's announcement, but will my right hon. Friend say a little more about the development of the countryside stewardship scheme? I know from experience in my constituency that the scheme is welcomed not only by the farming community but much more widely. It represents a partnership between the farming community and people who, in many cases, used to work on farms. Can he give us any hope that that type of activity will be expanded in years to come? It is particularly welcomed by tourists and everyone who can benefit from it.

Mr. Brown: I am doubling expenditure on the scheme, and that announcement will be welcome to the farming community. The scheme is oversubscribed, which demonstrates how popular it is, and it provides farm businesses with a steady and fixed income stream. They are working in partnership with the Government to provide goods that are easily defended to the electorate—the environmental benefits that we know our citizens want.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Does the Minister understand—I have a sneaking suspicion that he might—that the proposals that he has announced will generally be welcomed? They are a significant step in the right direction. However, I am not sure whether they are as radical as he thought. I enter two caveats.

First, when the Minister makes his announcement, will he please try to give the information on an annual, financial year basis? It is difficult to absorb the figures. As I understand it, they run for not only the next Parliament but the one after that, so the £500 million for the countryside stewardship scheme is over seven years and amounts to about £60 million or £70 million a year. Undoubtedly, that scheme is good in principle, but—this is my second caveat—before the Minister commits large additional sums to it, I urge him to look into the bureaucracy of administering and monitoring it. I think that something like a quarter of the money that is spent on countryside stewardship goes on monitoring. Could we see more of it going into bringing more benefits for the environment and farmers?

Mr. Brown: I do not want to overburden all these excellent schemes with administrative costs and I will be taking a hard look at those. However, we must ensure that the schemes are being implemented properly and that they represent good value for money. I do not propose the expenditure of the same figure year on year. The hon. Gentleman is the Chairman of the Select Committee on Agriculture and I know that he fully understands that the European moneys effectively come on a flat profile—the same sum, with some small allowance for inflation, each year. The expenditure in my Department is profiled similarly and is, in any event, subject to the normal public spending rounds. The two new figures—the sums modulated and the match funding that accompanies the modulation—are on a rising profile. The schemes will therefore steadily expand over the period. It is my intention to publish an explanatory booklet setting all that out, with the indicative figures, so that everyone can see the rising profile of expenditure year on year.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the countryside stewardship scheme. Farmers are enthusiastic about the schemes and, as I know that he understands, they are oversubscribed. Today's statement is significant for two reasons. It provides new money in an intelligent way that supports farm businesses without coupling the payments to production and, every bit as significant, it points the way forward for reform of the CAP.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I assure my right hon. Friend that the offer of new money will go down well with Scottish farmers. Will match funding be available to Scottish farmers and will it be ring-fenced so that it is spent entirely on agriculture?

Mr. Brown: The schemes are shaped in such a way that they are almost entirely focused on farm-based businesses. The money that will be spent in Scotland is ring-fenced for Scotland. Of course, the expenditure heads are devolved now to the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament, but every pound modulated in Scotland will be matched by a further pound from the UK Exchequer. That must be welcome news for farmers in Scotland, as it will be throughout the United Kingdom.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the more he seeks to make the figures sound very big by adding together seven years of expenditure, the more I form the impression that the figures are probably not as big as he would like some of his hon. Friends to believe? In view of the catastrophic

situation of so many in the farming industry, what is the right hon. Gentleman's best estimate of new money for year 1?

Mr. Brown: I intend to publish the figures rather than give an estimate. I am trying to explain to the House that the profile rises over the period as a result of the way in which modulation works. The total sums, including the modulated amounts and the match funding, represent over the period a 60 per cent. increase on what would have been spent had we not made use of modulation and match funding. The amount that we will spend at the end of the period compared with the amount at the beginning of the period represents a more than doubling of current expenditure.

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): I know that struggling farmers in Shropshire will warmly welcome the announcement. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister on all his endeavours in the past few months. I welcome the new money for organic conversion. Will he reaffirm the Government's long-term commitment to improving the lot of organic farmers and making money more widely available for conversion?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for welcoming the extra sums that we intend to spend on the organic farm conversion scheme. Although I have given the House the total figure, my hon. Friend will realise that it will cover more organic farmers as the scheme develops. As it is a conversion scheme, as farmers leave the scheme, new farmers will be able to come in so the impact will be bigger than the figures might at first sight suggest.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): The Minister is well aware of the state of the farming industry in Northern Ireland, and he knows that any money, especially new money, is invaluable to farming. The Minister said:

"The third source . . . will be the redirection, or modulation, into the RDR of a small percentage of £1.6 billion in direct production subsidies paid to UK farmers".

Does that mean that money will immediately cease being paid to farmers who are currently receiving it? That has caused an uproar this afternoon in my country. As the Minister knows, I now have some responsibilities as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development. There are serious fears that the farmers who are in most need of money will have money removed from them in the short term as a result of the announcement today.

Mr. Brown: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new responsibilities.

I understand what the hon. Gentleman says. Every pound modulated in Northern Ireland will be spent in Northern Ireland and will be matched by an extra pound from the United Kingdom Treasury. In other words, it is impossible for farming, collectively, in the Province to lose out under the scheme. That is the crucial point. How the money is to be spent on schemes or allocated between different interests in the farm sector in Northern Ireland is now a devolved matter, in which I know that the hon. Gentleman will take a particular interest.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): Has my right hon. Friend noticed the glum faces among Opposition Members, who have become used to exploiting the hardship in which farmers have recently found themselves? I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement and his personal efforts—as well as those of his team—in securing greater investment from Europe. The statement and the new set of arrangements will help farmers to see beyond the immediate crisis to the future; it will give them the opportunity to take part in that future. Will my right hon. Friend pass a message to the regional development agencies about the role that they can play in rewarding and promoting entrepreneurship in the rural economy?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is on to the right point. In my statement, I indicated the way forward and I want to involve the regional partners fully in what is being done. We are trying to show the way forward for rural farm businesses and to provide supports that are decoupled from production. The scheme is funded partly through modulation, but it attracts match funding from the Treasury. It is impossible for any region not to be a beneficiary of the announcement.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): Many Opposition Members would welcome the scheme if we could properly understand it. The difficulty is that modulation of direct grants means a cut in direct grants and a recycling of that money to other pockets. That is not new money. Will the Minister help me and Britain's farmers by telling us how much new money will go into the scheme, either in year 1 or year 7? Just give us a figure.

Mr. Brown: The sums that are being modulated rise over the period. At the end of the scheme, we estimate that the sum being spent will be £100 million in England. That will be matched by £100 million of new money. It will be a rising profile of expenditure over the period. In the final year, 2006–07, the outturn will be £295 million, which is an extremely large sum of money.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): I join colleagues in welcoming the statement, but want to draw attention to the concerns that have been expressed about the delivery of the schemes. First, it is important that they should be integrated with other farm-targeted business assistance run by other Departments and also with the work of the regional development agencies.

Secondly, I share the concern that early retirement schemes have been firmly banged on the head. I am aware that several farmers in my area would welcome some way of moving out of the farm sector, and had thought that the scheme might provide a route. Thirdly, will my right hon. Friend give some indication of the balance of opinion on the means of modulation in the consultation exercise? From the parts of the process that I have seen, my impression is that there was a strong feeling that larger farmers and greater beneficiaries of aid schemes should suffer more than smaller farmers from any modulation.

Mr. Brown: In response to the consultation exercise, a numerical majority of farmers in England—I was responsible only for the consultation in England—were in favour of modulation in principle. The farming unions are cautious about modulation and have made two points to me: they want to know how the fruits of modulation will be spent and they want an assurance that the money will

[Mr. Brown]

be spent on farm businesses, or matters of importance to such businesses. I can give the House that assurance today.

The National Farmers Union has made it very clear to me that it would consider modulation to be reasonable only if it were a lever for match funding. I can give the House the assurance that, for every pound modulated, there is another pound from the Exchequer, so this is match funding and new money.

I accept what my hon. Friend says about the early retirement scheme. I have tried very hard to make it work, but we cannot do so in a way that would represent value for money, so it is better to say, candidly, that there will be no such scheme.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): The Minister will be aware of the severe difficulties that livestock farmers in upland areas are facing. Will he give the House the assurance that, when his study of the hill livestock compensatory allowances is completed, whatever money it indicates as necessary for the payments of future HLCAs will not be top sliced from the money that he has spoken of this afternoon?

Mr. Brown: The enhancement of the less-favoured areas regime, which the Government have carried out for the past two years, has for each year been a stand-alone announcement as part of an aid package to help the uplands through difficult times. There is much in this package that will help the upland farmers. The LFAs—some of them, at any rate—are in some of the most outstandingly beautiful parts of the countryside. It should be possible to draw on the countryside stewardship schemes, the farm diversification programme and the other measures that I have announced today to enhance farm incomes in the less-favoured areas.

There will be an annual review of the hill livestock compensatory allowances at the end of the summer, as there is every year, except that, this year, such a review was pre-empted by my announcement of the extra £60 million—an announcement that was widely welcomed by hard-pressed hill farmers.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Having been a recent visitor to my constituency, he knows that it has 300 farms. May I ask him, in the cause of joined-up government, to consider the university for industry for the reskilling and retraining element of the rural package? As it is impossible to have a university for industry hub in a rural area, he might consider using Wye college—which has an astonishing IT background—for retraining and reskilling. The college is not in my constituency, but I have a very warm feeling for it.

Mr. Brown: I will take that as an early representation on the shape of the schemes, region by region. I want to ensure that, as far as possible, we focus the training moneys, the marketing grants and the farm enterprise scheme on young and innovative entrants to agriculture, so that we really can reshape farm businesses so that they are more market oriented and look to the future rather than back to circumstances that pertained 50 years ago.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Does the Minister accept that the failure to reverse the disastrous legacy of the previous Government has meant that there is a cumulative effect on farmers, especially livestock farmers? This week, this month, this winter, they are facing their bank managers and simply do not know whether they can survive. How quickly does the Minister estimate that his package will kick in to reverse the disastrous decline in farm incomes, especially in the less-favoured areas—and will he please tell the banks?

Mr. Brown: The modulation receipts come on stream in the year 2001–02. We shall submit our proposals to the European Union at the end of this year. Funding will continue for the existing schemes, but we anticipate a six-month pause as the old schemes are wound up and the new schemes are put in place. We hope to be able to make a start, later on next year, on the new package of measures that I have announced today.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Obviously, the farmers of Lancashire will welcome this good news today, and I am sure that the NFU in the north-west will fully support the proposals that have been laid before the House. There is a great danger that my right hon. Friend may become the patron saint of farming if he is not careful, because he seems to be coming regularly to the Chamber with very good news which is much welcomed. As my constituency encompasses a variety of farmers, from the arable farmers on the Lancashire plain right up to the hill farmers on the moors, many farmers in my constituency will be very pleased with today's announcement.

Will my right hon. Friend reiterate for the benefit of the Opposition that there is new money for farming and that it will go some way towards ending postcode farming grants? I am worried because my area has no objective assistance status. However, if I have understood my right hon. Friend's announcement correctly, farmers will be able to apply for new money whereas previously they were not able to do so. That will be welcome if it is true.

Mr. Brown: As for the danger that my hon. Friend alerts me to, it is not the biggest one that I face. I shall live with it.

My hon. Friend is right: this is new money to extend across the United Kingdom. Because the payments are decoupled from production—

Mr. Yeo: How much?

Mr. Brown: I have just explained that the figure will be on a rising profile. I have said that I will publish a table setting out how the profile will rise and I have said that, at the end of the period, total spend will be £295 million per year. I have tried to explain the figure in a number of different ways, but the hon. Gentleman does not seem to be able to comprehend it, but that might be because he does not want to. In any event, I can do more than say that I shall put into the public domain a table setting everything out, so that even Conservative Members can discern it.

Madam Speaker: Order. I do not look favourably upon repetition.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Will the right hon. Gentleman's announcement about funds for diversification

have any implications for the planning system? If it does, will it affect designation for areas of outstanding natural beauty or conflict with county structure plans? If so, what advice will he give to local government, or are the Government planning to take more powers unto themselves?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Lady is on to a good point. Clearly, farm diversifications that involve structural change to farm businesses, which is a perfectly good way for farm businesses to reshape and to become more market-oriented, have to be compatible with the planning system. I hope that the planning system will also shape itself to become more compatible with my ambitions for the successor scheme to the objective 5b scheme and the article 33 scheme—or the rural enterprise scheme, as it is now called.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): The Minister is being unduly modest about early retirements. In Dorset, farmers are taking early retirement at an enormous rate under his present policies. Will he consider carefully the effect of the over-30-months scheme on extensification of cattle? In Dorset, before BSE, many farmers in areas of outstanding natural beauty and on heath land fattened cattle for a long time without using concentrates. That was exactly the best thing to do to avoid BSE. However, unless the over-30-months scheme is relaxed, they will not be able to do that. When will the scheme be relaxed?

Mr. Brown: I accept that the hon. Gentleman is trying, in his mild-mannered way, to make a political point about the early retirement scheme. I have considered it carefully and we cannot make it work in a way that is good value for public money. It is better to say that now, so that we do not get behavioural change and so that people do not wait for a scheme that will not come on stream.

The average age of farmers in the United Kingdom is 57, which is the same as across the European Union. Behind that figure are many farmers in their early 60s who will want to think carefully about how long they will stay in farming and about the arrangements that they need to make for retirement and for their succession. That is why I have made this statement as clearly as I have today.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the future of the over-30-months scheme. As he knows, it is a very powerful public protection measure in this country and the Government are professionally advised by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee about it. I am awaiting advice from that committee.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): I apologise if the Minister thinks that he has already answered this question, but can I check whether the new match funding for Scotland will be in addition to the entire existing Scottish block?

Mr. Brown: The match funding is in addition to the sum modulated from the current compensation payments for price cuts. The sum across the United Kingdom is £1.6 billion. Match funding applies to the modulated amount alone; it does not apply to what is currently spent in the Scotland Office's block grant on agriculture, nor does it apply to Scotland's share of the money from the European Union.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): The Minister said in his statement that the review of hill livestock compensatory allowances would be made in the autumn. My calendar shows that we are in December and, thus, in the winter months—so will he tell farmers who rely on those payments when they will have a concrete idea of what to expect?

Mr. Brown: The payments are made in January, and of course this January they will be made at the enhanced rates because last autumn's review was pre-empted by my aid package. The 55 per cent. increase, which was an extra £60 million, was widely welcomed by hard-pressed hill farmers.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): As I understand it, the match funding is new money from the Treasury—yes? Is it also correct that one Parliament cannot commit another Parliament? Yes. Will the Minister now say exactly how much he has negotiated from the Treasury, as he will have had to do, to provide match funding for that first year? How much in pounds sterling?

Mr. Brown: I am not sure what the question is. If the hon. Gentleman is asking me how much comes on stream in the first year of modulation, I can tell him that the year will be 2001–02 and the sum will be about £34 million.

Mr. Fabricant: Thirty-four million!

Mr. Brown: That is doubled—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is trying to shout out the answers.

Madam Speaker: Order. When hon. Members have asked questions, they ought to listen to the answers.

Mr. Brown: We anticipate the fruits of modulation to be £34 million, and therefore the match funding for the United Kingdom will be £34 million. There is match funding, pound for pound, so £34 million from modulation in the first year, 2001–02, will be matched by £34 million from the Treasury. That is a profile of expenditure rising to the figures that I gave the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) earlier.

Point of Order

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I seek your advice on whether you might extend the scope of Standing Order No. 20, on giving time for hon. Members to put points to you.

My constituents have been trying to arrange a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), for some time. They believe that the civil service is feeding the hon. Gentleman incorrect information about a road scheme—the brown route—and they have asked me to hand information directly to the Minister. Unfortunately, the Minister's civil servants will not allow me to see him simply to hand over the information. I wonder whether Standing Order No. 20—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has the wrong Standing Order. He refers to Standing Order No. 20, but I think that he may mean Standing Order No. 24, on the motion for the Adjournment of the House. Is that the one? Which is the right Standing Order?

Mr. Bruce: Either one, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I feel that it must be a rather bogus point of order if the hon. Gentleman has not even taken the trouble to find the right Standing Order. I shall proceed with the main business.

Orders of the Day

Freedom of Information Bill

[Relevant documents: The Third Report of Session 1998–99 on the Freedom of Information draft Bill (HC 570-I), and the Government's response thereto (Session 1998–99, HC 831); the Fifth Report of Session 1998–99 on the Freedom of Information draft Bill: The Committee's Response to the Home Office Reply (HC 925); the First Report of Session 1999–2000 on the Freedom of Information Bill (HC 78).]

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

4.33 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Calls for a freedom of information Act have been made consistently over much of the past 20 years. Unnecessary secrecy in Government and our public services has long been held to undermine good governance and public administration, and my party has long been committed to change. At the last election, our manifesto stated:

"We are pledged to a Freedom of Information Act, leading to more open government."

The Bill will make that promise a reality.

The Bill, by its first clause, lays down for the first time in our constitutional history that the public have a right to know about the work of Government and all other public authorities. Again for the first time, that right of access to information will be enforced by an independent Information Commissioner and an Information Tribunal with clear powers to override the decisions of Ministers or any other public authority as to whether information should be released.

Moreover, the Bill will not only provide legal rights for the public and place legal duties on Ministers and public authorities, but will help to transform the culture of Government from one of secrecy to one of openness. It will transform the default setting from "this should be kept quiet unless" to "this should be published unless". By doing so, it should raise public confidence in the processes of government, and enhance the quality of decision making by the Government.

The process of developing the Bill—

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way so early in his speech.

The culture could be changed even now. We have had this Government for two years; have the Home Secretary and his colleagues already sought, by exhortation or memorandums, to elicit such a commitment within the Government?

Mr. Straw: I am pleased to tell the right hon. Gentleman that I have gone one step further than exhortation and memorandums. I have gone beyond the word to the deed. As I have made clear in evidence to Select Committees on two occasions, my approach as

Home Secretary has been far more open than those of any of my predecessors. For example, I have placed on the public record all sorts of internal operational documents—not only factual backgrounds and analyses—including all the manuals relating to the operation of the immigration and nationality directorate, save for those that cannot safely be published for reasons of law enforcement or security.

I have ensured that all research documents are published on time. As for statistics—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman has asked me a question and I want to answer it. I have placed the issue of statistics in the Home Department at arm's length from Ministers, contrary to the way in which Conservative Ministers used to manipulate the date when statistics were to be published. I have ensured that dates are set well in advance of publication. We have brought in the Royal Statistical Society to advise us.

As for the inspectorate of Her Majesty's prisons, when I came to office, lying on my desk were more than a dozen reports of the chief inspector of prisons, some of which had been there for more than 12 months. They were still awaiting a decision on publication. I have established a protocol on publication so that they have to be published swiftly. If there is argument between the Director General of the Prison Service and the chief inspector, there is a procedure for resolving that. I am glad to have had the opportunity to answer the right hon. Gentleman's question.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: I shall give way to both of my hon. Friends and then I shall make some progress.

Mr. Jones: Will my right hon. Friend continue with his good example and exhort his fellow Ministers in other Departments also to impart information? I have been trying for more than a month to get some information from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport about the sale of tickets for the millennium experience. I have not yet been able to discover why it is so difficult to obtain the information.

Mr. Straw: The proposed legislation goes beyond exhortation to impose legal duties on Ministers. I shall, of course, take up the point that my hon. Friend raises.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I was astonished to hear what my right hon. Friend said earlier. Is he saying that the former Home Office Minister, who is now sitting on the Opposition Front Bench, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), left for him to pick up 12 reports on prisons which were gathering dust, on which she had taken no decision while she was a Minister? She now has the cheek to come before the House and argue with my right hon. Friend on freedom of information issues.

Mr. Straw: I say that with one caveat. I do not know—I have no access to the advice given to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and her former boss and friend, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard)—whether the reports were resting on the right hon. Lady's desk or on the desk of the right hon. and learned Gentleman, my predecessor. I can only tell my hon. Friend that some of those documents had been outstanding for more than 12 months.

We need to judge people and we need to judge the extraordinary reasoned amendment, with which I shall deal in a moment. We must judge the Conservative party not by its vacuous words now but by its deeds when in government. We know that Conservative Ministers were practising a culture of secrecy even on issues that plainly should have been in the public domain.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I have given way on three occasions and I would like to make some progress. Then, as I always do, I shall give way again.

The process of developing the Bill has been open. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), who I see in his place and to whom I pay tribute, produced a White Paper in December 1997. There was an inquiry into that White Paper by the Select Committee on Public Administration, and a public consultation exercise. The Government responded to the Select Committee's report and to the consultation, and produced a draft Bill in May this year.

We then had further public consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny on the draft Bill, again by the Public Administration Committee and by a Committee in another place. The Government responded to the reports of those Committees and amended the draft Bill in significant ways, as I shall set out later. A series of background papers to the Cabinet Committee's discussions has also been published.

As my hon. Friends know, I am always happy to engage in argument as to whether the Bill goes far enough, and I look forward to doing so this afternoon.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): On that point—

Mr. Straw: I shall give way when I have made some more progress.

The last people to make that criticism are the Opposition—hon. Members such as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, who, for 18 years, set their face against any legally enforceable right to know.

When she was Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher said:

"A Freedom of Information Act is inappropriate and unnecessary."

Lest anyone believes that that policy was jettisoned with her premiership, the Conservative party stated in 1997, at the time of the general election, in its campaign guide:

"The only group in Britain who are seriously interested in a Freedom of Information Act are inquisitive left-wing busy bodies."

[Mr. Straw]

Incredibly, the Opposition are now posing as the defenders of open government. *[Interruption.]* Their amendment today is nothing short of Kafkaesque. If this goes on, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald will soon be coming to the House to criticise the Government for failing to nationalise the banks and Britain's top 100 monopolies, and claiming that that was Tory policy all the time.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I shall give way in a moment.

I tell Opposition Members that it is one thing sensibly to modify policies in the light of an election defeat. *[Interruption.]* It is quite another thing to do a complete volte-face, without explanation or apology. The public tend to notice and are not impressed—*[Interruption.]*.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman. I do not want calling out from a sedentary position from either side of the House during the Home Secretary's speech.

Mr. Straw: I am not surprised that the Opposition do not like what I say. Their position on freedom of information is laughable and incredible. Their claim that the Bill

"will result in greater secrecy than is the case under the existing"—

non-statutory—

"Code of Practice"

is demonstrably untrue. That code was legally unenforceable. In contrast, the Bill is replete with legal powers of enforcement. The harm test under the code, which prevented disclosure, was much easier to pass than ours in the Bill will be. The Opposition's test was merely a test of the possibility of harm; ours is a test of the probability of harm.

I may be conceding too much to the Opposition in claiming that they have changed their policy. They had changed their policy when they drafted their reasoned amendment yesterday, but today I received two documents. One is from the Widdyweb, the internet website run by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, which states today:

"The shadow Home Secretary added that her party was content largely to see the status quo remain."

The other document was from the Conservative research department's daily bulletin for today. Under the heading

"Lines to take—Freedom of Information Bill",

we read:

"We"—

the Conservative party—

"believe it is for Parliament and for Ministers, not for judges or political appointees, to determine what information would be inappropriate in the public domain."

There we have it—not a new policy, but the old policy, a defence of the circumstances under which the Conservatives operated before, which led to them covering up document after document. I hope that, when the right hon. Lady makes her speech, she will explain which of the policies that she has enunciated in the past two days applies. Is she saying that we do not go far enough or that we go too far?

Mr. Bercow: Speaking as a right-wing inquisitive busybody, may I ask the right hon. Gentleman to tell the House, in the light of his veritable self-congratulation, why the director of the Campaign for Freedom of Information, Mr. Maurice Frankel, says that, in key areas, the Bill is weaker than the openness code introduced by the Conservatives?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman will have to ask Mr. Frankel that. I have discussed the matter with him, but he is demonstrably wrong about that. As I have already explained, the harm test operated in the code is a test only of the possibility of harm; the harm test to be operated under the Bill is the much higher test of the probability of harm.

Mr. Wardle: The Home Secretary knows that I have twice voiced concern in the House about freedom of information and the Security Service. When was he first told that Oleg Gordievsky confirmed Security Service suspicions that a prominent trade unionist had betrayed this country and NATO to the KGB for years, and why has he not made a statement to the House?

Mr. Straw: I am afraid that I cannot answer that without notice. If the hon. Gentleman gives me notice, I will give him an answer.

Mr. Hancock: I am sure that the Home Secretary agrees that there is widespread concern in the country about the way in which animal experimentation is cloaked in secrecy. What has he done in his Department to free up information about licences and experimentation, and what will the Bill achieve in bringing about greater openness in that area?

Mr. Straw: We are considering changes. The question of animal experimentation is central to the kind of freedom of information regime that should be constructed, where we have to balance the various interests of the right to know with the right of people lawfully to pursue their business, a right which all of us have to respect, and the need to ensure that, where it is necessary—only where it is necessary—for potential pharmaceutical products to be tested on animals in order to determine their safety, those experiments take place safely and securely. In addition, those who lawfully go about the business of testing pharmaceutical products, or those who are academics in that area, also have a right to their own personal safety, which right has often been put at grave risk.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I have been listening carefully to my right hon. Friend and I think that he needs to brace himself, both today and in Committee, for a litany of examples from hon. Members who have sought to probe the Government, but without success. Would I be helped under the Bill, as distinct from the ministerial code of practice, in my question to the Prime Minister about the frequency of Cabinet meetings since the general election and the duration of each, which he declined or was unable to answer? Would I be given that

information under the Bill or would it still be deemed to cause substantial harm—or would there be some other excuse?

Mr. Straw: It will not be deemed to cause substantial harm. This is a matter of speculation and these decisions lie primarily in the hands of the Information Commissioner. The first issue would be whether such information came within clause 33, which relates to the formulation of Government policy and so on. If it was found by the commissioner to be exempt, the issue would be whether, under clause 13, the commissioner would recommend to Ministers that they disclose that information, and, if they did, whether the commissioner would particularly apply himself or herself to clause 13(5), which states:

"In making any decision under"

this clause regard should be had

"to the desirability of communicating to the applicant factual information which has been used, or is intended to be used, to provide an informed background to decision-taking."

Therefore, my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) is—

Mr. Brian Sedgemore (Hackney, South and Shoreditch): No.

Mr. Straw: No—it is not "no" at all. The answer is that my hon. Friend has a much better chance with the Bill than with the current code, and a much better chance than he would have had with the previous Government.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Gill: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: No. I shall make progress, and then I shall happily give way. I have already given way many times.

Another major difference between the Government's approach and that of the Opposition is that the Bill forms a coherent part of our overall programme of constitutional reform, which is the most extensive such programme this century. Our programme includes devolution to Scotland, Wales and—now, happily—Northern Ireland; new standards of conduct for political parties; and—most importantly in the context of the Freedom of Information Bill—the Human Rights Act 1998.

Mr. Gill: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I said that I shall not give way for now.

The 1998 Act sets out the European convention's statement of basic rights. Some of those rights are absolute—such as that provided in article 3, guaranteeing freedom from torture or degrading treatment. The rights with which we have had to wrestle in the Freedom of Information Bill are not absolutes, but have to be balanced one with another. Article 10 gives a right to freedom of expression, but that has to be set against article 8 on the right to respect for a private life.

We have therefore sought in the Bill to secure a balance between the right to information needed for the proper exercise of the freedom of expression and the—directly conflicting—right of individuals to protection of information about themselves; the rights that institutions, including commercial companies, should have to proper confidentiality; and the need for any organisation, including the Government, to be able to formulate its collective policies in private.

Clause 1 states:

"Any person making a request for information to a public authority is entitled—

(a) to be informed in writing by the public authority whether it holds information of the description specified in the request, and

(b) if that is the case, to have that information communicated to him."

That right is overseen by the Information Commissioner and the Information Tribunal.

I should like clearly to make this point, as there has been huge misunderstanding about the commissioner's powers. The commissioner and the tribunal have the last word on whether information is or is not exempt, and on whether any prejudice is caused sufficiently to justify non-disclosure. In the sphere of policy advice—dealt with in clause 34, and other than for central Government—the commissioner and the tribunal have the last word on whether the authorised person's opinion is reasonable.

Only if the commissioner and the tribunal agree that information is exempt, and that the public authority is therefore under no duty whatever to publish, does the discretionary disclosure power and duty under clause 13 arise. In such a case—for reasons that I shall be happy to explain—the power of the commissioner and of the tribunal is limited to a recommendation, albeit a very powerful one.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Will the Home Secretary explain why, in clause 33, central Government are exempting from the disclosure requirement information held by themselves, even when disclosure of that information would cause no prejudice to anyone? Why are the Government—to adopt the Home Secretary's own phrase—insisting on unnecessary secrecy?

Mr. Straw: We are not insisting on unnecessary secrecy. It has been accepted by people on all sides of the argument, and in all sensible freedom of information regimes of which I am aware, that policy advice and information on policy formulation—the way in which Ministers communicate with their private office, for example—should be exempt. We have therefore said that it should be exempt.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and the Weald): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I am answering the question asked by the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), and then I shall give way to the right hon. Lady.

We are therefore saying that such information should be exempt. However, the issue of whether information should come within that exemption will be for the commissioner. If a Minister were foolish enough to say that a piece of information that should not be classified should be so classified, the commissioner would be able to see the information and to make a decision. Moreover, even when the commissioner, backed by the tribunal, decides that the Minister is correct in asserting that the information is exempt, the Minister is still under a duty,

[Mr. Straw]

imposed in clause 13, to consider whether—using the balancing test, which tips the balance strongly in favour of factual information—to issue it.

The commissioner will be able to make a recommendation in such cases, and my belief is that it would be very unusual—not impossible, but unusual—for such a recommendation to be overridden.

Miss Widdecombe: No one will argue—no one has ever done so—that internal advice in the form of a judgment submitted by a civil servant to a Minister should be published. That would rapidly make government unworkable. However, judgments and recommendations are made on the basis of factual material, which is sometimes statistical, and sometimes constitutes other sorts of information. By gathering all the information under the class exemption, it is possible to resist publishing not only the advice but the information on which it is based.

Mr. Straw: I understand the point, but if the right hon. Lady will bear with me, I shall deal with the question of whether it is possible to disentangle factual information and analysis from policy advice. We have not closed the door on attempting to find a sensible way of doing that.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) *rose—*

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I shall give way first to the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan), and then to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Morgan: On the harm test, the Secretary of State will know that his opposite number in Scotland, who is not in the same party, plans to introduce a test of substantial prejudice rather than prejudice. How will that affect clause 26, which covers the relations between the Westminster Government and the devolved Administrations? The Scottish Executive are not a public authority under the Bill. Could there be circumstances in which the Westminster Administration refused to publish details of their relations with Scotland because they considered such publication prejudicial, whereas the Scottish Executive published them because they did not believe that publication would be substantially prejudicial?

Mr. Straw: I doubt whether that will happen. The Scottish Executive document presents only proposals at this stage, and we await the small print, which is always important. While the commissioner has the power to order the publication of information when we can only make a recommendation, annexe C deals with the problem for Ministers in Scotland by providing for an Executive override—not once, not twice, but 15 times. We have not made such a provision. The whole document, not simply part of it, should be read.

On the hon. Gentleman's more substantial point about the transmission of information, it is settled that the copyright is in the hands of the originator, so the release of information that originated with us would be a matter for Westminster. The same would apply to Scotland.

Mr. Campbell: Imagine a civil servant who gives information to a Minister on a subject as important as BSE or guns to Iraq. During the deliberations of the Select Committee on Public Administration, its members said that we should try to discover hidden secrets, of which there were many under the previous Government, and get hold of information before it could be covered up. BSE was covered up under the previous Government. Will the Bill prevent such information from being concealed at the stage when discussions take place between civil servants and Ministers?

Mr. Straw: No freedom of information regime is a cure for bad government. America has the most extensive freedom of information regime, yet Government improprieties happen there more frequently than here. It is possible to make parts of a freedom of information regime self-defeating. We want to ensure that that does not happen here. In the United States, information is sometimes simply not recorded because people wish to avoid its exposure. Under those circumstances, the trail of accountability does not exist. When I was given bits of paper—they were hardly submissions—to sign late last year and early this year on what became known as Mitrokhin, I noted them, ticked them and recorded the date on which I had seen them. That is the way in which Ministers ensure that they are held to account. When I was asked when I had seen the information I could not immediately recall the exact date, although I recalled that I had seen it. The file was sent for and I was able to report—not to the House, because it was during the recess—within two days exactly what information I had seen. That is now being submitted in text to the Intelligence and Security Committee.

If we go too far, as we have seen with other Administrations, those ticks would not be on the documents, because the Minister would not be willing to say whether he had seen the information. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) said that when he went to Australia he was told rather cynically by officials there that they had two devices for getting round what they thought was over-elaborate freedom of information legislation. One was to put documents on a trolley and wheel it into the Cabinet room. Those documents then became Cabinet documents and were exempt, as though they had been sprinkled with holy water. The second device was to make extensive use of post-it notes. That is a way of undermining the accountability of Ministers and I do not want it repeated here.

I have given an extensive answer to my hon. Friend, but I should like to deal with arms to Iraq and BSE as well. I have thought carefully about the issues and I do not believe that an FOI regime—that which we propose or any other that I have seen—would have guaranteed that either situation would not have come about. It is possible that in the arms to Iraq affair, the challenge on whether information should have been withheld on what turned out to be spurious national security grounds—which had to take place when there was a challenge to a public

interest immunity certificate in court—might well have taken place earlier before the Information Commissioner. That might have ensured that some of the injustices that followed did not happen or were halted earlier.

As for BSE, I draw to my hon. Friend's attention not just the provisions in the Bill, but the measures that the House has already passed under the Food Standards Act 1999. The Food Standards Agency has been given extensive powers on the disclosure of information, including aspects of policy advice.

Mr. Gill: The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) challenged us to produce evidence of information being withheld and talked about allegations of torture. Last week, I asked the Foreign Secretary which member countries of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, of which we are one, had failed to eradicate torture. The Minister who replied did not give me the answer that I was seeking. He would not say which countries had still not prohibited torture, but simply said that instances of abuse persisted in many parts of the region. I seek clarification from the Home Secretary. Does he believe that passing the Bill would alter that situation and would oblige the Foreign Secretary to tell me in which OSCE countries torture still persisted?

Mr. Straw: I cannot arbitrate in the matter of the hon. Gentleman's specific example. If he feels aggrieved as a result of the answer that he has been given, he should be aware that he would have significant powers under the Bill—greater than he currently has. I imagine that the Foreign Secretary would justify his refusal to make such a disclosure under clause 25, on the grounds that it would be likely to prejudice relations between the United Kingdom and any other state. The hon. Gentleman would then be able to challenge whether the information came within the exemption. Even if it did, he would be able to rely on clause 13, possibly backed by a recommendation in favour of disclosure by the commissioner, to require the Secretary of State to look again at the refusal to disclose the information. I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): Many Labour Members have been in favour of freedom of information legislation all our parliamentary lives, so we very much welcome the Bill—particularly in its strengthened form. As I understand it, the Information Commissioner has the right to recommend publication in almost all cases. However, in certain cases, the Minister is able to resist that recommendation.

Miss Widdecombe: In all cases.

Mr. Radice: Well, I would like it explained why that should be so.

In addition, we can all understand the case for keeping policy advice confidential. Is it not possible to separate policy advice from the information behind that policy advice?

Mr. Straw: On my right hon. Friend's second point, we have not yet found a formula which safely does as he asks, although I am happy to continue the search for one.

The question of the powers of the commissioner has been the subject of some misunderstanding. Clause 1 lays down the right to know for citizens. Part II sets out circumstances in which information can be exempt from that right to know. In some cases, information is exempt as a class—the best example of that is national security. In many other cases, it is exempt where it is subject to a harm test. Generally, this is a test of prejudice, but in some cases—for example, in respect of health and safety—it is a matter of whether the release of that information would seriously endanger the health and safety of an individual.

In one case where policy advice is concerned, that, too, is exempt as a class. Under clause 34, the exemption is subject to certification by a qualified person. In each of those cases—as set out in clauses 50 to 55 and the schedules—the commissioner has not just a power to recommend, but a power to enforce the decision which he or she makes to require the publication of information.

So far as those areas covered by a class exemption are concerned—including clauses 33 and 34—if the commissioner says that he or she does not accept that the information comes within that class—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] But the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has just accepted the need for a class exemption for policy advice and for national security. If she is saying that that is not needed, I look forward to hearing from her. That has always been the position that she has adopted in the past.

So far as a class exemption is concerned, it is for the commissioner to say whether or not the information comes properly within that class of information. So far as those areas covered by part II are concerned, and where there is harm test, the commissioner can substitute his or her judgment on whether harm will be caused for the judgment of the Minister. The commissioner's decision is final, subject only to appeal to the tribunal. There are extensive powers of enforcement and offences created for failing to comply with the orders of the commissioner.

It is only where the tribunal and the commissioner have themselves said that the Minister is not under a duty to release the information that the issue of discretion arises. However, even though the Minister or public authority is not under a duty to release the information, the Minister is under a duty to consider releasing information, and the commissioner can make a recommendation to that effect.

One of the issues that has been raised is whether the commissioner should have the final decision, even in respect of himself or herself. We can discuss that more in Committee. Scotland has said that the commissioner has the final decision, but has then said that the Executive can override that decision. I would suggest to the House that that is a distinction without a difference.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: Since I have been on my feet for 34 minutes and I know that many other Members wish to speak, I will, if I may, make some progress. I will then happily give way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

I want to deal with some of the areas where we have moved away from the White Paper. The White Paper proposed a test of substantial harm but the Bill uses a test of prejudice. The consultation exercise is instructive here. In the end, of course, we have to weigh the quality of an argument, not the quantity of the responses to it, but, as it happens, of those who commented on the substantial harm test, the majority raised objections.

[Mr. Straw]

There may be some who say that the views of, for example, the Confederation of British Industry, can simply be brushed aside; but we do not. We do not always agree with it, but it set out an argument against the substantial harm test clearly and cogently. It said:

"We believe the test for disclosing information should be one of simple harm and not substantial harm . . . Any attempt to limit the ability to withhold information to that which may cause substantial harm to a business may prevent the voluntary disclosure of information to Government. Without proper assurances, we do not consider that the Government's approach will achieve the objective of two-way openness and trust."

Similar arguments against the use of a relatively ill-defined adjective such as "substantial" can be made in respect of many other areas, not least law enforcement, so we moved away from the substantial harm test, but in other important ways the Bill is more open than the White Paper.

We have introduced the tribunal, so that an applicant has a quick and cheap way of appealing against the commissioner's decision. We have extended the coverage of the Bill beyond that proposed in the White Paper, to include the operational activities of the police and Parliament itself. Overall, although the package proposed in the White Paper has been changed, there are many instances in which the balance has moved towards a greater openness rather than in the other direction. That is well illustrated by the nine-page grid annexed to the latest report of the Public Administration Committee.

The proposals for Scotland are at an early stage and we look forward to the detail. It is of the essence of devolution that institutions do things differently. I am pleased to say that I enjoy constructive relations with Members of the Scottish Parliament and members of the Scottish Executive, both Labour and Liberal Democrat, and long may that continue, but, in the end, the separate institutions may come to different views, and we should not shy away from that. We should celebrate the fact that, in this United Kingdom, a Union of diverse nations, we can none the less accommodate such differences.

The Bill has been compared with the Irish Freedom of Information Act. Again, it is a matter for each state to determine for itself what legislation to enact, and Ireland has reached a view different from ours. The commissioner in Ireland can order disclosure in the public interest, although in key areas—as is proposed in Scotland—that is subject to ministerial override. In many areas, the Irish legislation is less open than the Bill. There is no access to information created before the Irish legislation came into force, whereas the Bill is fully retrospective, and the legislation in Ireland does not cover the police service at all.

The Bill will lead to cultural change throughout the public sector. There will be more information about how health authorities, local councils and the police deliver services. It will give citizens a right to know and a right to appeal to the commissioner if they do not get the information that they have sought. That is a fundamental change in the relationship between the citizens and the state.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: No doubt inadvertently, the Home Secretary mis-stated the law and what happened in relation to public interest immunity certificates in the arms to Iraq matter. The issuing of the certificates was not misdone, as Sir Richard Scott subsequently informed the House on 6 May 1996. The tests for PII, introduced after consultation on 18 December 1996, were tests of real harm or serious harm. The test of prejudice is a much weaker test.

Mr. Straw: I do not accept the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point, because we are dealing with two very different sets of circumstances. He has had experience of advising on the signing of PIIs and I have had considerable experience of having to authorise or, in some cases, not authorise them. The issue is whether information that is relevant to an individual's defence should be disclosed to that individual and to the court.

In this case, we are talking of differing circumstances. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman wishes to deal with the test that we have established for law enforcement generally—not in relation to PIIs—my view, and that of the police service, was that we could get into dangerous circumstances if we released information that it was accepted would cause harm to law enforcement but that had to be released because it could not be shown that it would cause substantial harm. We have to make fine judgments about what would be fully in the public interest. Would it be the release of that information, even though we knew it would cause harm to the public, or would it be the withholding of that information, because it would cause harm to the public? My judgment is that it is better, in those circumstances, to withhold the information.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): My right hon. Friend mentioned the Irish freedom of information legislation. He will be aware that, under arrangements made by both Governments, we now have cross-border bodies. Is he in a position to say what information will be available to members of the public in the United Kingdom about those cross-border bodies and their activities, and what further information may be available in the Republic of Ireland?

Mr. Straw: I cannot say exactly, but I will see whether the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwick-Sline (Mr. O'Brien) is able to provide that information when he winds up. I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier—that when one is dealing with two separate governmental institutions, the basic rule that applies is that the originating institution has ownership of that information.

The Public Administration Committee, in its latest report, made a number of proposals for changes to the draft Bill. In the Government's response, published on 19 October, we met some, although not all, of their proposals. The power of the commissioner has been expanded; the public interest test in clause 13 has been widened; the time limit for meeting applications for information has been cut by more than a third, from 40 calendar days to 20 working days; and the so-called cumulative harm test in clause 37 of the draft Bill has been removed, as has clause 44(7), against self-incrimination.

One area where so far it has not been possible to find accommodation for the Select Committee's views is in

identifying a robust formula that can safely distinguish between policy advice and what the Select Committee called

"purely factual information . . . and analysis"

used to inform policy decisions. I continue to wish to discuss that issue with right hon. and hon. Members. However, for reasons that I will now explain to the House, the difference between us and the Select Committee will in practice be much less than is imagined.

The assumption behind the recommendation of the Select Committee is that there is much purely factual information and analysis that informs policy decisions which is not published at all, or is published only by grace and favour of Ministers. In my experience, that is not correct. Let me illustrate that by taking two key areas of policy for which I am responsible—criminal justice, and asylum and immigration. The policy submissions I receive on both those areas do indeed contain much factual information, but almost all of it is already published; or if the data are provisional, it is about to be published. There is no separate set of statistics on police activity, criminal prosecutions and convictions or asylum applications to which I have access but Parliament and public do not. What is also frequently overlooked in this debate is that, by a separate White Paper, the Government will take additional steps to strengthen the independence of the Office for National Statistics and the integrity of its data.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): For the avoidance of doubt on an issue that my right hon. Friend mentioned earlier, will he confirm that, when the issue of the disclosure of exempt information on public interest grounds arises, that decision will finally be taken not by an independent Information Commissioner but by a Minister or a public body? What sort of circumstances might arise in which an Information Commissioner might recommend disclosure but a Minister or a public body would still withhold the information?

Mr. Straw: In terms of the Bill, what my hon. Friend says is correct; but, as I have explained, the discretionary power comes into play only after the Minister has been told by the commissioner that he or she has no duty to release information. If the Minister has such a duty and the commissioner orders the release of information, that is the end of the matter: the information must be released.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: No. I want to finish my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) asked whether I could anticipate circumstances in which, after the commissioner had been advised under clause 13 that the information should be disclosed, the Minister refused to disclose it. I cannot immediately offer my hon. Friend an example, but there might be circumstances in which Ministers genuinely thought that the release of such information could be highly prejudicial to negotiations with another state, to negotiations within the United Kingdom, or to national security.

I feel that there would be few occasions on which a Minister would, or should, refuse to accept the recommendation of the commissioner, just as I believe that there have been few occasions on which a Minister has refused to accept the recommendation of the ombudsman. None the less, I think it important to have a fail-safe mechanism. As my hon. Friend knows, many countries operate such a mechanism by way of Executive override, and that is what is proposed in Scotland. We are approaching the issue by what I consider to be a more straightforward route, but I expect the conclusion to be exactly the same.

This is a good Bill, which will transform the culture in which Governments operate. In particular, it will end the culture of secrecy in which the last Administration operated. For the first time, the people will have a right to know. The Bill compares well with legislation overseas. Each country must determine for itself where to set the balance between competing rights, such as the right to know, the right to privacy and the right to confidentiality. The balance of rights will be different everywhere.

The Bill is fully retrospective, unlike legislation in Ireland. It covers a wide range of organisations, including the police—again, not the case in Ireland—and provides access to a tribunal, unlike the proposals in the Scottish consultation paper. The Bill provides free access to the commissioner, whereas in Australia access to the administration tribunal requires payment of a fee. It also imposes strict limits on response times, unlike legislation in Canada, where many people have to wait for months to receive information.

The right to know, while it cannot be an unfettered right, has long been neglected in this country. The Opposition did nothing to promote a statutory right to know in 18 years of government; indeed, until now, they have consistently opposed such a move. Everyone will benefit from the Bill, which will help to deliver a more responsive, better informed and more accountable public service, and I commend it to the House.

5.23 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Freedom of Information Bill because it will result in greater secrecy than is the case under the existing Code of Practice, because it fails to promote open government instead of secrecy or transfer from Ministers and officials to Parliament the final decision over the release of information, and because it represents a significant dilution of the proposals in the White Paper, Your Right to Know (Cm 3818), and disregards the recommendations from the Select Committee on Public Administration."

If the Home Secretary is half as serious as he suggested about bringing greater openness to government, the Bill represents a missed opportunity. The right hon. Gentleman made tremendous virtue of the fact that he was putting openness on to a statutory footing, but all that he is putting on to a statutory footing is more secrecy than was contained in the code of practice. That is a backward step, rather than a step forward. A careful examination of what the House is really being asked to consider—behind all the smoke and mirrors—will show that the Bill takes us not forward, but back.

It is true that I have said that I would prefer the status quo to this Bill, which I believe will ultimately provide for less than is provided for by the status quo. I have said that, and I stand by it.

[Miss Ann Widdecombe]

I have also said that Parliament has a vital role in holding the Executive to account. That role is completely ignored by the Bill. Had the Bill lived up to half the rhetoric that we have heard from the Government, we might have moved into a new era of openness. The Government claim commitments to open government and to freedom of information. At the general election, the Labour manifesto claimed:

"Unnecessary secrecy in government leads to arrogance in government and defective policy decisions."

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I have hardly said the parliamentary equivalent of "Good afternoon", and I should like to make some progress.

As with so many Labour pledges, the Government's enthusiasm for what they said in Opposition has quickly waned. The manner in which they have treated Parliament and the public stands in stark contrast to the culture of openness that the Conservative Governments attempted to create. *[Interruption.]* On Sierra Leone—those words make the Labour Benches go quiet—the Foreign Secretary tried to refuse the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs access to relevant papers. On tax harmonisation, we had to wait until *The Daily Telegraph* published details of secret talks in which the Chancellor of the Exchequer had been engaged and which could give Brussels control of nearly 200 new taxes. It took another press revelation to tell us that the Prime Minister had intended to foist a coalition on us.

The Home Secretary himself is not whiter than white when it comes to openness in government. It took a leak of a Treasury letter—

Mr. Straw: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I shall finish what I am saying before I give way.

It took a leaked Treasury letter before the Home Secretary would admit the truth about police numbers. As he is so keen to interrupt, I shall now give way. Come on; the right hon. Gentleman has the Floor.

Mr. Straw: As well as giving us her fantasy, will the right hon. Lady tell us about her record? How was it that I was presented with a great pile of reports from the prisons inspectorate that had lain either on her desk or on that of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) for up to 12 months? Was that consistent with openness?

Miss Widdecombe: I was giving the House not a fantasy but a litany of the misdeeds of a Government who claim that they are committed to openness. It will not have escaped the House that, as ever, the Home Secretary spent the first half of his speech not presenting his proposals, but going back endlessly over our term in government. Presumably, he is practising for Opposition again. He must be looking forward to it.

Mr. Straw: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I am going to continue.

Mr. Straw: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: No.

Mr. Straw: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is clear that the right hon. Lady is not giving way.

Miss Widdecombe: The Home Secretary does not seem to realise that he is in government, and that he must answer for what is being done by the Bill.

We published the code of practice on access to Government information in 1994, and strengthened it in 1997. What the Home Secretary has said today and what is provided for by his class exemption on the formulation of Government policy may therefore be contrasted with what we provided for and that was: to publish the facts and the analysis of the facts that the Government considered relevant and important in framing major policy proposals and decisions; and that such information would normally be made available when policies and decisions were announced.

That was a clear attempt to make the distinction that the right hon. Gentleman suggested this afternoon could not readily be made, between an internal judgment or recommendation and the information from which that judgment or recommendation was drawn.

I put it to the right hon. Gentleman—I hope that he will consider this seriously during the passage of the Bill—that if we could do it in our "Code of Practice on Access to Government Information", he too can do it during the passage of the Bill.

Dr. Gibson: In what year was the public information disclosure Bill enacted? It prevented workers from being dismissed and allowed them to be safeguarded against problems arising from their blowing the whistle on companies after two good trade unionists—one in a Leeds general hospital and one in British Biotech—lost their positions because they raised issues of fraud and misconduct and the health hazards to the public caused by the misrepresentation of cancer drug trials in one case and the falsification of information in a hospital in the other. In what year was that Bill enacted?

Miss Widdecombe: I might have been more convinced by that Bill's usefulness had not my time as shadow Secretary of State for Health revealed that the Government were most unwilling to confront information when it was unhelpful to their cause. Indeed, I listed many such instances.

The Home Secretary may not understand this, but I am trying to deal with some of the detail of the Bill because it is seriously flawed. I am trying to draw out the flaws

and to test whether the right hon. Gentleman is receptive to the Bill being amended. I may be wrong, but I thought that that was what scrutiny by Parliament was all about.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): The right hon. Lady has suggested that the Bill ought to be amended in certain respects, and I agree. However, she is asking the House to accept an amendment that declines to give the Bill a Second Reading and that would prevent the House from reaching those parts and amending them. Is that her serious intention, or is it a device to enable those Tories who think that freedom of information is for left-wing busybodies to vote in the same Lobby as those who think that it is a good idea but that the Bill is defective in some respects?

Miss Widdecombe: We are used to a rather higher standard of intervention than that from the right hon. Gentleman. The position is extremely simple. We believe that the Bill is deeply flawed and that the Home Secretary has shown no willingness, during his analysis of it and in answering our questions, to ensure that it does not take us backwards in ways that I am endeavouring to illustrate. If he were prepared to give that undertaking, there might be some way forward. Until he is prepared to admit that, no, we do not want to give the Bill a Second Reading.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North) *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: I will give way in a moment. I want to move on to my next argument to show that the Bill is flawed.

The document to which I referred—our code of practice—set a challenging target for the amount of information that should be released by Government and public authorities. It made it clear that the approach of public authorities should be to release information

"in all cases . . . based on the assumption that information should be released except where disclosure would not be"—

not "could not" or "might possibly be", as the right hon. Gentleman claimed—

"in the public interest."

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): The right hon. Lady is saying that the information would be doing some harm. Will she illustrate using her own example what harm would have been done if the reports on the Prison Service that she did not publish had been published so that we all knew about the decisions that she was not taking as well as those that she was?

Miss Widdecombe: Let us hear about Wormwood Scrubs, shall we? The hon. Gentleman should know that I published scores of Prison Service reports, and that we then had in place a procedure that involved trying to get agreement on the facts—as opposed to the interpretation of the facts—between the chief inspector, the Director General of the Prison Service and Ministers. I am the first to acknowledge, and I acknowledged while in office, as the Home Secretary will find if he checks the record, that that sometimes led to cumbersome delays. I do not disapprove of the fact that there is now a different system. However, the idea that Prison Service reports were withheld because of some potential harm is absolute twaddle.

Perhaps we could now return to the detail of the Bill. For some reason, Labour Members are unwilling to buckle down and look at it. I sometimes wonder why Labour Members try to delay progress by going into extraneous highways and byways, when we are discussing things that apparently so exercised Labour Members that 195 of them signed a motion calling for amendments to the Bill, many of which have not been made.

Dr. Tony Wright: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman probably wants to make a point relating to earlier interventions. If his intervention is on the point that I am making, I will listen; but if it is on some extraneous matter, I will not.

Dr. Wright: Perhaps the right hon. Lady will listen and tell me whether my intervention is appropriate. I am trying to work out what she is inviting the House to do. The Bill has already been substantially improved through my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's constructive engagement. He says that he wants to improve it further by engaging in further discussion on it, yet the right hon. Lady is inviting the House to reject it on Second Reading so that it cannot be improved. Is that not simply daft?

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman is ever the optimist. I shall seek to demonstrate that, in most of its essentials, the Bill has not been improved. I do not believe that it will be. [HON. MEMBERS: "The right hon. Lady has not done her homework."] The unfortunate thing for Government Members is that I have done my homework. That is why I am trying to give the Bill a close analysis.

Helen Jones *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: I will give way because I told the hon. Lady that I would, but this is the last intervention that I shall take until I have covered the next point.

Helen Jones: The right hon. Lady argues that the Bill has not been improved. I put it to her that, in the Select Committee report, which details the process of pre-legislative scrutiny, she will find a number of recommendations that were accepted by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and are now included in the Bill. Is the right hon. Lady seriously arguing that we should not continue that process and continue to improve the Bill?

Miss Widdecombe: I intend to argue that many of the most salient recommendations have not been incorporated. I shall now make progress in arguing that.

I have never claimed that the code of practice that we introduced was perfect, that it could not be expanded, that it could not be built on and that it did not have some flaws of its own. I do claim that what is now being written into statute represents a deterioration from the position that was set out in the code. For example, many bodies are exempt from the provisions of the code simply because they do not come under the remit of the parliamentary ombudsman. It is not possible for the ombudsman, who enforces the code, to compel the release of information, but the code remains a clear statement in favour of

[Miss Widdecombe]

freedom of information, unlike the Bill, which I hope now to demonstrate represents backwards movement.

The Home Secretary and the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) have made much of the consultation process that the Home Secretary undertook in formulating his Bill, but he has spent much of his time since the publication of his White Paper "Your Right to Know" backtracking from the original proposals. For example, he has included many more class exemptions such as the exemption of all information relating to policy formulation. That is a backwards step from his White Paper and from our code of practice. It will have the effect of making secret more information.

The Home Secretary has changed the test on whether information should be released from substantial prejudice, which would have been tough to meet, to simple prejudice, which is easy to meet. That will mean that it is harder for information to qualify for release. He has backtracked from the pledge in the Government's White Paper to give the Information Commissioner the power to force public authorities to release information. His constant retreat from proposals that would encourage real openness is indicative of the weakness of the Government's commitment to the cause that they theoretically espouse.

We know the reason for the Government's sudden and dramatic change of heart. The enthusiasm for openness and proper freedom of information waned at about the same time that responsibility for the Bill was transferred from the Cabinet Office, where it was under the auspices of the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), to the Home Office.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. Does she feel that the provisions of the Bill will hinder or assist the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), who did a good job in preparing the Bill in the first place, in finding out who at No. 10 Downing street systematically rubbished him in the press in order to create vacancies for Liberal Democrats in a coalition with the Prime Minister?

Miss Widdecombe: I do not want to intrude on private grief.

It is clear that the Home Secretary does not share the enthusiastic feelings of many members of his party on this issue. It is surprising that he does not even agree with the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who was previously responsible for the Bill. That became clear during the debate on the Address, when the right hon. Gentleman made it clear that he was not happy with the stance of the Home Secretary. He said:

"we still have to persuade him further. We are not there yet."—[*Official Report*, 17 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 40.]

The initial stages of the consultation process were characterised by the Government moving in the opposite direction from the views that they were receiving from interested parties. Indeed, they completely ignored many of the salient recommendations in the Select Committee on Public Administration's report on the draft Bill. The Home Secretary made some minor proposals in respect of the Committee's findings but, in response, the Select Committee noted

"with some disappointment"

that

"most of the points we found unsatisfactory in our report of a few weeks ago remain part of the Bill."

The Committee expressed concern that there was no clear presumption in favour of disclosure; that the Information Commissioner could not order release of information on the grounds of public interest; and that there were still too many class exemptions in the Bill. We share many of those concerns and will raise them in Committee.

It was significant that the main feature of the Home Secretary's consultation process was his unwillingness to include the views of others. The Law Society said:

"Instead of a presumption in favour of disclosure of information we seem to have one which favours secrecy."

Charter 88 said:

"the legislation remains seriously flawed despite the concessions offered in October".

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. I think she said that the commissioner does not have the power to issue disclosure. However, does she accept that, in respect of part II, the commissioner has clear powers to order disclosure and to enforce such an order?

Miss Widdecombe: Only if the matter is not covered by an exemption. The commissioner has no power on the public interest, which will be one of the principal tests.

I was telling the House what other people have said. The National Union of Journalists said that it

"is deeply concerned at the failings in the Bill. After waiting decades for Labour to make good its promise of freedom of information we find a proposal which in some ways is a backward step".

There are several key points on which we shall try to improve the Government's flawed proposals. The Bill introduces many more class exemptions than are found in the code of practice. That is an undisputable fact. We shall seek to remove from the Bill two significant class exemptions that are not found in the code of practice.

Possibly the most contentious of the new class exemptions contained in the Bill is the one that I have mentioned, which relates to the formulation of Government policy. As I have said already, and would always say, we agree that internal civil service policy documents, which are advice from civil servants to Ministers, should not be released. I accept that utterly; but it must be right that the background data that have informed policy making should be released in some, if not in most, cases. We began that process when in government—we did not complete it, but we began it—and we shall work to ensure that the Government do not try to row back from that now.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): On that very point, which the right hon. Lady has now covered twice, she will be aware of the evidence given by Lord Butler of Brockwell, the former Cabinet Secretary, to the House of Lords Select Committee appointed to consider the draft Bill, in which he said, at page 58 of that Committee's report:

"when we were coming up to the 1997 election, knowing what the government policy was in this matter, my senior colleagues and I gave some thought to how we could regularly structure submissions to Ministers in a way that would enable us easily to separate the background which was publishable from, as it were, the subjective advice which was confidential. It would take a bit of training and"—

these are important words—

"changing practice to do that, but I think that people could very readily adapt to that."

Can the right hon. Lady explain what was happening in her Government, that that change had to take place in anticipation of our Government?

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman makes my case for me, because he has made a clear case that it is possible to separate the advice from the information on which it is based, and that is what we accepted in part 1, section 3(i) of our 1997 "Code of Practice on Access to Government Information" when we said that we should

"publish the facts and analysis of the facts which"

were

"relevant and important in framing major policy proposals and decisions".

[Interruption.] I am going to make this analysis because it is a crucial one. It is possible—the former Cabinet Secretary says that it is possible—to distinguish between advice and information, so why does the Home Secretary have one omnium-gatherum class exemption to cover all of it?

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I give way for the last time.

Helen Jackson: My logic may be flawed but it seems to me that, not longer than five minutes ago, the right hon. Lady said that she admitted to the House that she preferred the status quo. The intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) has just drawn from her a totally different interpretation—that she was perhaps trying to change the status quo.

Miss Widdecombe: I do not know whether it is the hon. Lady's logic that is flawed as much as her understanding.

Helen Jackson *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: I will not give way. I shall say this once more, and only once more. Our code of practice, which I have quoted so often that I cannot read out all the words again, clearly stated that not just the opinions and the submissions, but the facts and analysis of the facts that the Government consider relevant and important are to be published.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr) *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: I very clearly said that that was the last intervention for some time.

In his evidence, the former Cabinet Secretary made it clear that it was possible to distinguish between advice and information, but the Home Secretary's class exemption does not distinguish between the two. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) seems unable to follow that elementary reasoning.

Mr. Williams *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: I shall now make progress.

We shall also oppose any class exemption on information relating to the investigation of accidents. Obviously, we would not countenance the release of documents that would prejudice criminal proceedings, but we do believe that the public should have access to some documents relating to incidents, such as—it is only an example—the recent tragedy at Paddington. In relation to certain types of information, there is an absolute need for a class exemption.

For example, we accept—there is no argument between us about this—that the Home Secretary is right to say that information received in confidence from a foreign Government should not be subject to the provisions of the Bill. However, the increased number of exemptions in the Bill will undeniably make more information secret than was the case under the code of practice. Therefore, we shall examine every class exemption that the Government propose to introduce and we shall evaluate whether the exemption rows back from the code of practice or, indeed, from the Home Secretary's own White Paper.

Another fundamental flaw in the Bill is the inherent weakness of the Information Commissioner, who will be set up by the Government supposedly to enforce freedom of information. Under their proposals, the Information Commissioner will not be able to compel disclosure of information where he deems release to be in the public interest. That is the difference between what we advance, which is that the Information Commissioner should be limited by what is in the public interest, and what the Home Secretary advances, which relates simply to what is not covered by an exemption. They are two completely different cases.

If a member of the public appeals to the commissioner after being denied information, the commissioner cannot order disclosure and nor can the tribunal, which is the appellate body, and nor can the courts, which can address only points of law and not the substance of whether the public interest is being served. Therefore, it is clear that Ministers will continue to decide whether information should be released or not.

Mr. Bercow: Is it not a source of disturbance to Conservative Members that the Bill offers no prospect in future of better ministerial performance at Question Time than we have witnessed in the past when, as my right hon. Friend will agree, obfuscation has been the norm and disclosure has been the exception? Will she cast her mind back 27 hours and tell me whether she thinks that, under the Bill, I am likely to get a better answer to the question that I posed to the Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), about the effect on job opportunities of the manufacture by prisoners of 260,000 pairs of slippers between March 1997 and March 2000?

Miss Widdecombe: You might, Mr. Deputy Speaker, rebuke me if I endeavoured to rehearse yesterday's

[Miss Widdecombe]

Question Time, and I see nods from the people at whom I am not supposed to look. Therefore, I will not be tempted down that route. However, it would be high optimism to the point of folly to assume that any Freedom of Information Bill would improve ministerial answers at Question Time. Perhaps, now—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I say again that I do not want to hear exchanges across the Floor when the House should be paying attention to an hon. Member.

Miss Widdecombe: I was saying that the final fundamental flaw in the Government's proposals is the side-lining of Parliament. The Bill contains no provision for ensuring that Parliament plays a role in ensuring openness. In decisions relating to the public interest, we believe that it is right for elected Members of Parliament to hold Ministers to account.

There are many other more detailed problems with the Bill. For example, under its provisions, it is up to the Home Secretary to decide which public authorities are subject to the legislation, and it can be noted from the Bill that he will do so by order. That is in contrast to the Human Rights Act 1998, in which it is for the courts to decide whether a body should be subject to legislation.

We shall also need to examine carefully the Government's proposals to merge the post of Information Commissioner with that of the existing Data Protection Registrar. I do not doubt in any way the excellent work done by Elizabeth France, the current Data Protection Registrar, to whom the House is very grateful. However, we shall need to consider carefully giving responsibility for ensuring openness to a post which at the moment ensures secrecy and privacy. We believe that they are two separate and distinct roles and that any attempt to confuse them could result in a less effective enforcement process.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): If the right hon. Lady is suggesting, as she has done in press interviews, that going to the ombudsman is the better route, will she explain how the effectiveness of the ombudsman will interact with that of the Data Protection Registrar? The two posts are inextricably linked, as the evidence to the Select Committee showed.

Miss Widdecombe: I shall come to our proposals for the ombudsman if the hon. Gentleman will exercise patience.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): Before my right hon. Friend comes to that important point, may I suggest caution? She has suggested two classes in which she absolutely accepts the exemptions. The first is information given in confidence between Governments. This country is part of the European Union and therefore ruled by the agreement of Governments. Information that is commonplace within our own self-rule area will not be available under the provisions. That is an important point.

The other exemptions that my right hon. Friend mentioned are those that relate to policy advice. She will recall that the former Chancellor of the Exchequer made available to the world advice on changes in interest rates—a practice continued by the present Government and put in statute. That did not bring about the fall of British Governments, and many of us would argue that it improved the quality of judgment and reassured markets about the performance of the British economy. I suggest that my right hon. Friend takes account of that caution because the proposals in the Bill are draconian.

Miss Widdecombe: I agree with my hon. Friend's final point that many of the proposals in the Bill can be called draconian. I undertake to consider his first point carefully. However, on his second point, there may be occasions when Ministers, with the agreement of permanent secretaries, want to release policy advice. I am not saying that they should never under any circumstances release such information, but that there should not be a running requirement for them to do so.

Among our proposals would be the removal of many class exemptions. We would set up a powerful new information ombudsman with the power to compel public authorities to release information on a test of public interest. Members of the public could appeal directly to him if they have been denied information by any public authority. We would set up a parliamentary information Committee to oversee the work of the information ombudsman.

In summary, the Government's rhetoric and what they have presented to the House are not compatible. They say that they are in favour of greater openness, but their flawed proposals will make more information secret. The consultation period has been characterised by ignoring most of the major recommendations that they received. We are in favour of greater openness and our introduction of the code of practice and our strengthening of it three years after its introduction demonstrate our commitment. However, I have admitted that that code was not perfect, and I would have been perfectly happy for it to have been built on a great deal further.

The proposals that I have outlined today are simply common sense. If we are to have a Freedom of Information Bill, it must result in more information being released and it must give Parliament a role in ensuring openness. We shall continue along that path in our approach to the Bill. We shall endeavour to ensure through whatever mechanisms that are available to us that, by the end of its processes—if such processes the Bill is granted—it will improve the position and not cause it to deteriorate in the way that the Bill would at present.

5.59 pm

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): It is rather strange to participate in the debate and to consider the Opposition amendment. I am not sure whether I find it galling that the Opposition take the view that we should reject the Bill on Second Reading, and thereby, as the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) pointed out, obviate any possibility of improving the Bill, or whether I should put their view down to hypocrisy.

I have to say, when I consider the history of openness and Government action in this country, that I accept that the previous Government took steps in the right direction when they introduced the code of practice. However, I do not accept the point made by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) that the Bill is weaker than the code. It is a psychological as well as a statutory point that, if the Bill becomes law, it will give the people of Britain a right of access to information that they have never had before. That is a mammoth step forward.

If I am a little indiscreet, it will be in the name of freedom of information, but I recall sitting down, on the first Saturday in May, with my permanent secretary and discussing what was in the manifesto. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary stated, it contained a clear commitment to introduce a freedom of information Bill. My permanent secretary indicated that there had been almost no work to prepare for such a Bill, for the simple reason that the previous Administration had explicitly—I emphasise the word "explicitly"—decided that there would be no such legislation, so there was no need for any preparation.

I was faced with the opportunity to introduce a Bill or to put the code into statute. I studied the code very carefully and I saw that it had virtues, but also weaknesses, and I did not think that it was appropriate to proceed with the code. My Cabinet colleagues and I therefore set about drawing up a White Paper. It was two years ago, almost to the day, that I stood at the Dispatch Box apologising to the House because—surprise, surprise—somebody had leaked the freedom of information White Paper. That document was a major step forward that took many hours of work and involved almost every other Cabinet Minister. That work enabled us to proceed with preparing the legislation.

Like everyone who has wrestled with this problem, I have found that it is not easy to solve. It involves many issues, such as privacy, to which the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald referred when she was talking about the Data Protection Registrar. There are two sides to the coin, and it is difficult to get things right. Almost every Member of the House accepts that there are parts of public administration about which information cannot safely be released to the general public, and our citizens clearly understand that.

Having said that, I strongly believe that, as we move into the new millennium, we must start building a new concordat with our citizens. If we are to be modern and progressive, we must be bold. My view is that there is obsessive secrecy in Britain. Secrecy is almost endemic in senior levels of the civil service, and that must be changed. That is why I was so keen to put forward a radical White Paper, and I was delighted that all my Cabinet colleagues, including the Prime Minister, endorsed it.

I read the draft Bill published by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. I am delighted that he took that to a pre-legislative stage. I read very carefully the work of the two Select Committees—the Public Administration Committee in this House and a Select Committee in the House of Lords. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend saw fit to accept a number of recommendations by those Committees, and this Bill is certainly an improvement on the draft Bill that was before us six months ago.

I was encouraged to hear my right hon. Friend say—or at least I thought that I heard him say—that his ears are not completely closed to further improvements to the Bill, if we can determine what improvements should be made. That is why the official Opposition, in seeking to defeat the Bill, have deeply flawed logic. I hope that we can use the good will that exists on both sides of the House to improve the Bill in Committee. I shall make one or two suggestions that I believe will strengthen the Bill.

First, I shall make a general point. One problem, which is not the fault of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, is that the Bill has become incredibly complex. As I listened to the speeches of my right hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, I began to wonder whether I had understood the Bill, because it is clear that there is confusion about the power of the Information Commissioner compared with that of a Minister. I am not sure whether Ministers' interpretation of that power is the same as mine, but I shall return to that important point.

When I considered overseas examples, I was determined that a freedom of information Bill should be written for the benefit not of Ministers, civil servants, business men or journalists, but of the ordinary citizens of this country, who I believe have a right to know much more of what goes on behind the closed doors of bureaucracy.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To pick up the right hon. Gentleman's point, does he agree that we need to address the sheer complexity of the way in which this Bill—and far too many other Bills in recent years—has been drafted, and that we could learn a thing or two from European legislative methods, even if, for many of us, that might stick in the throat?

Dr. Clark: The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes a serious point. I know that a number of people feel that, in devolving certain powers to other Assemblies, we have missed an opportunity to take a bold initiative and use a different form of language. I accept his point because I, too, wanted a system that was easy to understand and easy to use. One should be able to enter a system that begins with the White Paper and goes right through to the appeals process. The system that I wanted was clear. There were no class exemptions and, although there were some exclusions, access to other information was based on the issue of substantial harm; that would have been a better way to proceed.

Dr. Gibson: Is my right hon. Friend aware of how many amendments have been made since the 1966 Act was passed in the United States and how that Act has changed?

Dr. Clark: My hon. Friend makes a salient point. I have always argued that the Bill will change; it will change for the better and make the system more open as society changes. We must recognise that and, to accommodate it, we need to include a form of words that gives the Home Secretary various powers to make orders under the affirmative procedure. I note that such provisions are made in the Bill. I was keen that opportunities for litigation, which is so prevalent in the United States, should not be too easily available under our system, and I hope that we can pursue that point.

I am pleased that the Bill is broad and covers a wide range of public administration. That is correct. I wanted the Bill also to be deep—it may be lacking in certain substantive rights, but perhaps we can put right some of those points. I was encouraged by the rhetoric used today by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. I pay tribute to his openness, because he is one of the Ministers in this Administration who has been very open.

I remember sending a missive to my Cabinet colleagues asking which were the oldest documents held by their Departments. I will not regale the House with

[Dr. Clark]

the responses; perhaps my right hon. Friend will do so on another occasion. However, he referred to a document which went back to 1874. He was able to release it with the names of the individuals crossed out. It was important that that was done, otherwise there could have been criminal activity. That was an example of a Minister who tried to be more open.

A key point made by all hon. Members is that there are opportunities for openness for members of the Government and members of other public bodies, but they do not avail themselves of them. If we are to change the culture, it is important that we change the approach within public administration. I wonder whether—this point was picked up by the Select Committee, and the Government half addressed it by moving clause 8 to a different place in the Bill—it would be sensible to have a purpose clause at the beginning of the Bill. Such a clause would get across to the ordinary man and woman in the street that he or she had the right to access. At the same time, it would inculcate into the administration—into our senior civil servants and public bureaucrats—that there is a responsibility to be open.

That responsibility exists in the code, which states:

"The approach to release of information should in all cases be based on the assumption that information should be released except where disclosure would not be in the public interest".

That point was made fairly by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, and perhaps it is something that we should consider writing into the Bill in Committee.

Perhaps we should again be considering whether it is possible to play around with "prejudice", "harm", "simple prejudice" and "substantial prejudice". I would be happy to see different categories. In the White Paper, we accepted that advice to Ministers would be subject to a simple harm test. We argued that, for the general release of information, there should be a substantial harm test. There may be gradations and perhaps we could include "serious" in front of "prejudice". It is something that the Select Committee considered.

The power of the Information Commissioner concerns many hon. Members on both sides of the House. Having considered overseas examples, especially that of New Zealand, I recognise that it is an important issue. If we are serious, as an Administration in the new millennium, about forming a new concordat with our citizens and trying to rebuild trust with them in an increasingly individualistic world, it is important that, on occasion, we trust other people—I am talking of people who will have been chosen carefully and who are experts—to take decisions. As I understand it, when it comes to public interest, it is Ministers, not the Information Commissioner, who will have the final word.

I know that my right hon. Friend believes that the issue is being exaggerated; he feels that the power will not be used. I point out to him that such a clause was originally in the New Zealand freedom of information legislation, and, in the first six months, there were seven occasions on which individual Ministers overruled the Information Commissioner. The legislation was then changed and the power was given through an Order in Council to, in effect, the entire Cabinet. The power has never been used since. I consider this to be a strong point. I ask my right hon. Friend to reconsider the matter before Committee to see whether there is a way forward. It would be a great step forward in rebuilding confidence among our citizens on this issue.

Miss Widdecombe: The right hon. Gentleman is making an extremely helpful speech. He talks about the power of the commissioner. Perhaps he suggests that a limitation of that power would be somewhat equivalent to an Order in Council. Our suggestion is for a very senior and carefully balanced parliamentary Committee. Will he comment on that before he brings his remarks to an end?

Dr. Clark: I was keen, when drawing up the White Paper, that we should try to involve Parliament. I also wanted a simple procedure. I felt originally that, if there were any appeal system to the Information Commissioner, it should involve a Select Committee. I eventually rejected that approach for the simple reason that it was pointed out to me that data protection operated through a tribunal system, and that, in any event, there might be appeals from the Select Committee to the legal system. I do not have a completely closed mind on the issue, but I feel that Ministers should not have the final say. I hope that my right hon. Friend will consider the matter.

On the issue of policy advice, I take hope from my right hon. Friend's initial statement. I believe that the people of this country elect a Government to govern; therefore, it is important that the Government can govern. It is equally important that not every decision is taken in a goldfish bowl. I can understand why advice on current issues between Ministers and their advisers should not be made public. However, I do not understand the exemption of background material—by introducing an exempt category, we are possibly defending publicly weak Ministers and weak advisers. I find that strange, because I am of the view that the Home Secretary is an efficient Minister. I have already said that he is an open Minister. He is also on top of his job.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend would have no hesitation in making available much of the background, analytical and factual information. Not only should Ministers do that, but such information should be available much more openly across government. I would have no hesitation in accepting that every paper relating to my time in the Cabinet Office should be made available. I have nothing to hide. If Ministers and their advisers felt that, at some time in the future, their advice—honestly and openly given—together with the background papers that they drew up, should be made available—this has been the experience overseas—there would be a better quality of advice. That relates to both factual and analytical material.

I know that my right hon. Friend has said that he might be prepared to move on this issue if we can put forward sufficiently clear wording and a sufficiently cogent case. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has said that the code came up with a form of words. It may not be appropriate, but it could probably be adapted.

Another powerful point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne). In the Select Committee in another place, Lord Butler, who has a great deal of experience of these issues, said, "It can be done." We take encouragement from my right hon. Friend's words and I hope he will listen to the House. We want this Bill to work. It will last us well into the next millennium and it gives us a new opportunity.

The Government rightly take a great deal of credit for the major constitutional changes that they have made through devolution and right across the gamut. The constitutional change represented by the Bill is probably more important and will probably affect more of our citizens than any other legislation that the Government are likely to introduce.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has moved the Bill a long way forward. There is just a little further to go before he has a very, very good Bill. I hope that he will listen to the House, and that the result will be legislation of which we are all proud. I hope that the House will vote against the official Opposition's motion and in favour of the Bill. I hope that we can then perfect the Bill in Committee.

6.20 pm

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) in the debate. All those concerned about freedom of information would wish to pay the warmest tribute to him for his role in introducing the legislation. In the name of freedom of information, he revealed that he had won the hearts and minds of his colleagues in Cabinet for the White Paper for which he was responsible. In the discussions that he had with the Liberal Democrats following the election, he had no difficulty in reaching a consensus about what should be done.

Like the right hon. Gentleman, I am puzzled by the transformation that has come over the Government on the issue. Many of the points to which he drew attention mirror our concerns and are matters on which we wish to make progress during the passage of the Bill. I hope that the Home Secretary is as open-minded as his right hon. Friend suggested about the possibility of doing that.

We recognised from the start that the Bill has good points. We welcome the establishment, for the first time, of a statutory right to information in place of the previous effective presumption in favour of secrecy. We also welcome the scope of the Bill, which goes much further in its coverage of public authorities than any of the non-statutory codes or guidelines for which the previous Government were responsible.

We appreciate the Government's offer of consultation, which led to some changes in the Bill. That was preceded by discussion in Select Committees in both Houses and an extensive trawl of public opinion. That has resulted in a reduction in the time within which public authorities will have to reply to requests for information. We welcome the fact that reasons for refusals must be given, and we welcome the removal of some of the more ridiculous clauses such as the proposed gagging clause that sought to control the further use of information by those to whom it was disclosed.

However, that welcome must be heavily qualified by the fact that the Bill for which the Home Secretary was responsible and, which has been considerably amended, appeared to be almost paranoid in its approach to official secrecy and would have been counter-productive to its stated objective of promoting openness.

What has replaced it may not have the same characteristics, but in some significant respects it is deeply disappointing. It bears no comparison with the Government's progressive White Paper, or with the principled rhetoric that the Government deployed in support of openness while in opposition. Many of us feel baffled and mystified about how such a timid measure could have resulted from 25 years of Labour party commitment—not to speak of the commitment of my party and others—to effective freedom of information legislation. Some 80 or 90 organisations support the Campaign for Freedom of Information. The Home Secretary is aware of the extent of the disappointment that the Bill provokes.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I have in my hand the Prime Minister's answer to a written question, which gives me information on how many times the Cabinet Joint Consultative Committee has met. What was on the agenda falls within the ambit of the Official Secrets Act 1911. When the Liberal Democrats had discussions with the Prime Minister after the general election about setting up the new Joint Consultative Committee, what strictures were placed on the Prime Minister by the Liberal Democrats with regard to open government considerations?

Mr. Maclennan: Following the election, responsibility for such matters lay with the right hon. Member for South Shields. We were entirely ad idem, if I may use a lawyer's expression, with him. As he spoke for the Government, we were delighted to think that we were of one mind.

It is difficult to take seriously the rather bizarre motion tabled by the official Opposition, who have been staunch opponents of freedom of information legislation for as long as I can remember. No significant Conservative voice has been raised in support—*[Interruption.]* I exempt the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), who is to some extent a semi-detached member of his party. He is scarcely enough to provide the Opposition with a fig leaf for the consistency of their opposition to the possibility of such legislation.

Perhaps the incident that created the greatest public awareness of the importance of the issue was the nexus of events connected with arms to Iraq and the Scott report. Even at the time, when the then Government were under enormous pressure, the then President of the Board of Trade stated during the debate in the House on the Scott report that it was the Government's view that a freedom of information Act was

"not the right way towards a fundamental opening up of government."—[*Official Report*, 26 February 1996; Vol. 272, c. 594.]

Following the speech of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), I am left in no clarity of mind about the official Opposition's attitude. She seems to be twitting the Home Secretary for not having gone far enough, but fundamentally her position and that of her party seem not to have changed. The official Opposition are hostile to the idea of a freedom of information Act and will therefore vote against the Bill tonight. We shall have great pleasure in voting against the right hon. Lady.

Before considering the detail—I shall follow closely the line of argument of the right hon. Member for South Shields—it is important to consider the purpose of the Bill. The Home Secretary has spoken of the legislation transforming the relationship between citizen and state, and I go along with him in seeking that.

[Mr. Maclennan]

Confidence in the relationship between Government and the citizenry is declining. In particular circumstances, it is right that, in their dealings with the state, people should be able know why public authorities make the decisions that they make. Parents applying for a place in a local school, people applying for a grant or benefit, or business people tendering for a public contract should know the criteria against which they are being judged and, as a result of openness, should know that those criteria are being applied fairly.

At higher levels of government, real openness could play a significant part in rebuilding people's faith in government and in increasing participation in debate. Plainly, the public, Parliament and the organisations that represent the public should know more about the factual foundations upon which policy decision are based.

We do not contend that thousands of interested citizens will pore over the background reports to Government decisions, but we do say that interested organisations, such as the Consumers Association, Shelter and the Patients Association, should be able to judge whether the Government base their decisions, policies and actions on sound information. They should be able, through their campaigns, to inform the public what is going on and the reasons for it.

That would help to increase the Government's responsiveness and the fact that such factual information is being made available would enhance the carefulness with which it was presented to Government and so improve the quality of government. That view has been stated again by Lord Butler, someone not notably open in his approach. I well remember his appearances before the Public Accounts Committee, which considered him one of the less communicative permanent secretaries. Even he seems to have been willing to recognise not only the possibility but the desirability of opening up factual information.

Once again, there has been talk about the possibility of openness bringing about a new political culture. If there is to be a new political culture, it will have to come about as a result of something much more remarkable than the Bill. I endorse what has been said about the complexity of its drafting, although I disagree with the former Attorney-General's view that responsibility lies with the Home Secretary. Responsibility for parliamentary draftsmanship used to lie rather more with the Law Officers, and there was no notable improvement in the standards of parliamentary draftsmanship when the Attorney-General was a Law Officer.

The Bill is peculiarly serpentine and byzantine in its construction. It does not lend itself to being described as a clarion call for greater openness. The point that I made in an intervention, to which the Home Secretary was kind enough to reply earlier, about the attitudes of Government and what they are doing about it is not wholly answered by the listing of some particular examples of his own openness. I have known the Home Secretary long enough to know that he is anxious to ensure, and has made a personal contribution to ensuring, that statistical information is provided in an objective and open fashion, but he must know that that is not sufficient to bring about the change in culture to which he hopefully referred.

Civil servants throughout the entire machine require something along the lines of a Cabinet secretary memorandum encapsulating the Government's philosophy of openness—if it is a philosophy that they embrace—a philosophy that has the imprimatur of approval from the head of the civil service and goes wider than the woolly statements about cultural change that have come from those on the Government Benches tonight.

The Government's White Paper contained language that showed an impressive level of vision and commitment, but the sight of the Government in full flight from that White Paper provides a less-than-convincing inspiration for change. A grudgingly conceded enactment is scarcely the clarion call that is needed.

I am genuinely puzzled by why the Home Secretary has backed off from the Government's broader commitments and watered down the measure in the manner that he has. I do not know what he thinks he has to fear from enacting the kind of measure that would have been consonant with the White Paper. He is perfectly capable of dealing with criticisms flowing from greater public knowledge of the factors being considered in policy making. His colleagues are as capable as any Ministers in the 32 years that I have been a Member of the House, and those that are not will quickly and properly be extruded from the system. The Government are quite capable of standing up to such debates and arguments, which would be fortified because they revealed the true basis of policy. The Home Secretary's approach is genuinely inexplicable. It leads me to hope that he may be susceptible to argument during the Bill's passage.

One of the points mentioned by the right hon. Member for South Shields was the purpose clause. I welcome the rejigging of the Bill to set out the rights in clause 1, which gives them a certain primacy. However, that does not go nearly far enough; nor does it reflect the thinking that was present in such a clause in New Zealand in particular, from which the right hon. Gentleman clearly drew inspiration. In clause 4 of their legislation, the New Zealand Government undertook progressively to increase the availability of official information to the people of New Zealand. That was a rubric against which Government measures could be judged and which could be of assistance to the ombudsman in interpreting particular circumstances in the courts.

The small changes that the Home Secretary has made to the Bill's long title and the movement of the right-to-know clause do not go far enough, and I hope that more can be done along the lines of the Public Administration Committee's recommendation to bring forward an explicitly stated presumption in favour of disclosure.

There has already been some debate about the powers of the Information Commissioner. It is perfectly possible for the Home Secretary to develop his interventions to point out the extent to which he has powers. We shall no doubt consider that in detail during the Bill's passage. It is also true that the commissioner is a moral force in favour of openness at the heart of public administration. It is her role—we know that it will be Elizabeth France—to advocate the cause of freedom of information, and push and prod reluctant Governments and public servants towards that goal. That moral role needs to be backed by effective legal authority. Where there is a question about where the public interest lies, she should be the person who is enabled to order disclosure in most circumstances.

I have heard the Secretary of State say that Governments and Ministers are elected to take decisions and that such decisions should not be put into commission, but to take that principled stand is to knock fatally the possibility of there being an independent reference point for judgment of where the public interest lies in respect of disclosure. Ultimately, it makes it a matter of discretion for Ministers. It makes it a political case that their right not to disclose should be more powerful than the public interest in disclosure.

It is true that Secretaries of State have the constitutional right to decide issues, but they do not have the constitutional right, even under the conventions of our system, to wrap up those decisions in such a way that they cannot be called to account for their decisions. Any decisions that they make should be made in the full light of knowledge about how those decisions have been reached. I believe that, in addressing that issue, it would be sensible for the House to follow the New Zealand example.

The Scottish Executive has come to the same conclusion, and relevant proposals have been made in Scotland. Although the Home Secretary might dislike those proposals as much as he disliked the White Paper, at which he has whittled away, I hope that he is not proposing to intervene in Scotland, to claw back in any way the devolved power to decide. I take it from his extolling of the virtues of devolution, when asked about the subject earlier in the debate, that he would regard such intervention as improper.

It is perverse to do as the Bill suggests—to leave the power of deciding where the public interest lies with those who might be at most risk of criticism if disclosure were to follow. It is extremely unlikely that the public interest in disclosure would be the conclusive factor for those who might fear being caught out for squandering public funds, breaking promises, ignoring reports of child abuse or endangered patients because of incompetent cancer screening, to take some of the examples mentioned by the Campaign for Freedom of Information.

The proposal to limit the Information Commissioner's power seriously reduces the worth of freedom of information as a means of scrutinising the public service. Moreover, the power to order disclosure in the public interest is even more essential because of the way in which the Bill has been structured, particularly the very broad and numerous exemptions to the right to information that it provides.

Obviously, freedom of information legislation must protect certain sensitive information that might harm the national interest: on the detection and prevention of crime; national economic interests; information given in confidence; and various other interests. However, it was the White Paper that said:

"we do not propose that the Act should contain exempt categories at all, but rather that disclosure should be assessed on a contents basis."

If there has been one U-turn more spectacular than all the rest, it has been the structuring of the Bill in that manner, with those exempted categories, completely reversing the thrust of earlier proposals.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: There has been some mention in the debate of Matrix Churchill and Scott matters. As the right hon. Gentleman will recall, those matters—with the strong support of the then Opposition—did away entirely with the idea of class claims, which the Government are now resuscitating.

Mr. Maclennan: I remember that, but I do not recall the right hon. and learned Gentleman being very enthusiastic about the proposals.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman's power of recollection is rather poor. I refer him to *Hansard*, 18 December 1996, column 949.

Mr. Maclennan: I pride myself on having quite a good memory, but I cannot remember that particular column. Nevertheless, I shall refresh my memory of it.

The debate on exempt categories has gone backwards. The White Paper proposed seven exempt categories and the draft Bill proposed 22—incidentally, the previous Government's non-statutory code had 15—but the Bill has 24 exempt categories. Furthermore, the Bill provides a power to increase the number, which, given the rate of multiplication that we have seen, must concern us all.

The class exemption applicable to all investigations that might lead to criminal prosecutions may entail that, in future, other families such as the Reels and the Lawrences who want information about the investigation of their child's death could be turned away. That is only one potential problem. One could think of many worrying possibilities in which public health and safety would not provide sufficient reason for opening up access to important information.

Some people may recall the food poisoning outbreak in 1996 in Lanarkshire. I wonder whether the facts in that case could have been kept under wraps because of the possibility of a prosecution. I wonder, similarly, whether Health and Safety Executive investigations into rail accidents will be kept confidential because they might lead to prosecutions.

A report detailing the sale of substandard or dangerous products might also be concealed, under the exemption category of prejudice to a person's commercial interest, on the mere evidence that customers might switch manufacturers if they became aware of the danger.

Another investigation is being conducted into the 1994 Chinook crash in the Mull of Kintyre. The journalist Tony Collins has suggested that the crash might have been caused by software failure. Will such information be wrapped up and not made generally available because it might conceivably prejudice our defence? Those seem to be serious deficiencies in the Bill.

The right hon. Member for South Shields mentioned the shift from substantial harm to prejudice. That shift is particularly important in the context of category exemptions. The draft Bill spoke of prejudice being

"actual, real or 'of substance'",

and the Home Secretary has said in evidence to a Select Committee that that is broadly what he has in mind. However, that is not what the Bill says. The Bill should state what the Home Secretary really wants to say—if that is what he wants to say. We shall undoubtedly have to return to that issue at great length in Committee.

On the aspiration that the Bill might change public attitudes, the most seriously objectionable class exemption is that which relates to policy development. It is

[Mr. Maclennan]

nonsensical for a party that has for years said that it wants to promote more open government to propose excluding all information, regardless of how innocuous, by using the category test. The Home Secretary himself mentioned the Labour party's manifesto, which stated that

"unnecessary secrecy in government leads to arrogance . . . and defective policy decisions".

Evidence on the experience of other countries demonstrates how disclosure of information on policy development does nothing to damage governance. I detected from the Home Secretary's comments on the United States' experience that he thought that that experience had not been helpful. However, comparison with the United States is not sensible. Its system of government—a federal one, with a separate executive and legislature—is so different from ours that comparisons simply cannot sensibly be made.

Developments in Australia, Canada and, particularly, New Zealand—which seems to have had the most success in working out an effective system—should be persuasive. Ministers should read the 1996 report of the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration on the operation of freedom of information legislation in those countries. I remind the Home Secretary that the report stated that operation of freedom of information in those countries had

"encouraged objective, reasoned and defensible decision making"

and that

"the dire forecasts as to its effect on the candour of advice had not been borne out by events."

Ireland's legislation has been enacted too recently for us to judge its results, but it resembles that of the other countries that I mentioned.

As others have said, dividing policy advice and the factual foundations for that advice is practicable. Lord Butler spoke about that in general terms. If the Home Secretary is willing to tackle the matter, others will help to devise suitable definitions.

On advice, I remind the Home Secretary that our starting point in the recent round of debate was the Scott inquiry. Ministers have a right to define their view of where the public interest lies and to use their democratic mandate to back their claim. However, they do not have the right to erect a wall of secrecy to shield their mistakes from public scrutiny. We have a duty to try to avoid their mistakes. We will be helped by the Bill's improvement. I profoundly hope that improvement will be the consequence of its passage.

Everyday contact with all levels of public administration should become more open and easily understandable. If that happens, we may change the conduct of public business and relations between the citizen and the state. I ask the Secretary of State to recapture the spirit that informed the White Paper and to seek carefully and deliberately to amend the Bill, which we shall support in principle tonight, to achieve that end.

6.52 pm

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): On any test, we have taken a long time to reach this point. The Labour party has been committed to legislation on freedom of information since 1974. It is a subject that Oppositions tend to embrace with relish and on which Governments have found reasons to postpone legislation with equal relish. However, this time it is different, and we should celebrate that.

Talking about Oppositions reminds me that today's Opposition ask us to decline to approve Second Reading of the measure. I sat through the last Parliament and watched the then Government decline to accept the Scott report's recommendations on information. They not only declined to support, but ruthlessly destroyed, the Public Interest Disclosure Bill, which was designed to protect public interest whistleblowers. In 1996, I was a member of the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, to which the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) referred. The Committee had a Conservative majority, but recommended that there should be freedom of information legislation. The previous Government rejected that recommendation. Thus, the Opposition do not have much of a track record on which to lecture the House on the virtues of freedom of information. The Opposition have elevated collective amnesia to a political strategy, and made shamelessness their second nature.

Hon. Members have referred to the code, which was introduced rather casually and as a means of diverting the argument about the need for legislation was not considered significant at the time. The code became effective in its way, not because of its founders' intentions, but through the robust activity of the ombudsman and his successor who presided over it. It became more effective than anyone believed that it would. However, it remained a code. When the Select Committee visited New Zealand and we told people in Australia and New Zealand that we simply had a code, they laughed at the idea that a mature democracy could have an informal code to govern the information rights of citizens in relation to the state. We had to move from a code to legislation. That is happening now.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The hon. Gentleman criticises the code that the previous Government introduced, but will he acknowledge that, because it focused on content rather than classes of exemptions, and because, as a code, it was less restrictive than legislation, it allowed greater access to information than the Bill will grant?

Dr. Wright: I said that the code had virtues, and I shall mention more of them shortly. However, the House should understand its origins and context.

We have travelled a long way from the White Paper. There is always a distance between a White Paper and a Bill; they are different projects. However, there is a difference in tone between the Bill and the White Paper of only two years ago. I re-read the White Paper last night, and its tone reflected that of a Government who were determined to break down the culture of secrecy and ensure maximum disclosure of information. By contrast, the Bill exhibits a determination to ensure that freedom of information legislation is accompanied by barricades of protection against disclosure.

On any test, the Bill is an historic measure and marks an important moment. For that reason, it should have a whiff of history about it; it should even sing a little. We

have heard convoluted talk about purpose clauses, but they are simply ways of making a document as significant as its founders intend it to be. The Bill should not represent a sultry and churlish monotone. We should try to recapture at least some of the spirit of the White Paper.

The Home Secretary has suffered a good deal of opprobrium. Much of it was unfair for at least two reasons. First, the opprobrium should be more widely spread. The fact that *The Guardian* claims that the Bill is unsatisfactory does not mean that it is satisfactory. Secondly, the Home Secretary has shown absolute openness in his approach to consultation throughout the draft Bill process. It would have been impossible to approach it in a more robustly open and engaging spirit. That is shown by the fact that we have been able to make improvements.

The endless reports of the Select Committee on Public Administration, including the most recent, which was published a few days ago, draw to the House's attention the fact that we have travelled a good way from the draft Bill. That vindicates the scrutiny process and the draft Bill process that have been applied to the measure. The Bill would be the poorer had it not undergone the process. Without it, indefensible provisions might have been passed, and the measure would have been much weaker.

Some people say that the Government have made concessions, but that is the wrong way to look at it. The question is whether the House has made improvements. Those who talk about Government concessions do not understand what is going on or the importance of the process. This is not the moment to remind the House or my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary of some of the embarrassing features of the original proposals that fortunately no longer exist, but they were defended at the time and no doubt they would have been voted for if the Bill had been dealt with in the normal way. Thank goodness it was not. Scrutiny has been effective and the Bill is being improved.

This is a Bill of historic importance, with many exemplary features, not least of which is its scope. Some of its earlier defects have been removed, but the question is whether it is now satisfactory and incapable of further improvement. I believe that it is not. We are left with some fundamental issues that have been clarified by the process that has been engaged in. The House simply has to come to a view on those fundamental issues.

The issues that have already been mentioned touch on the fundamentals of the argument. There is no excuse for finding the issues terribly complicated and difficult. The approach to information should be straightforward: it should be disclosed except when disclosure would cause identifiable harm to a specified significant interest. There should be minimum class exemptions and as much disclosure as possible, subject to a harm test.

The issue of who decides is also fundamental. The more I think about it, the more I am persuaded of that. We can pass measures, we can have forms of words and we can define exemptions, but it comes down to particular cases. Who will weigh the public interest? Who will decide whether there is a public interest in disclosure that outweighs an interest in withholding? Someone has to have the last word in each case. Whether it is to be a Minister, a public authority or an independent person goes to the heart of our approach.

Mr. Patrick Hall (Bedford): Does my hon. Friend agree that one feature of the previous Government that was widely perceived as arrogance was how they identified their interest with the public interest? That is how they operated, but it may also be the British system of governance. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill provides us with an opportunity to put the balance of power back with the citizen, where it should be?

Dr. Wright: I agree that the behaviour of the previous Government was characterised by arrogance, particularly in their dire closing period. There was a suggestion that their interest was the same as the public interest. All Governments have a vested interest on the issue; they all have a taste for secrecy. It is the job of the House to ensure that it is not satisfied. That is what we are being asked to do.

I should like to relate those approaches to our arguments about the key issues. Policy formulation is dealt with in clauses 33 and 34. I do not believe that the House will allow those clauses to stand in their present form. They deal in blanket exemptions for categories of Government activity, most fundamentally the formulation or development of policy, as well as the operation of any ministerial private office. There is to be a blanket exemption for information about how many people work in a ministerial private office.

In case a blanket exemption is not enough, there is a second defence: the test of whether disclosure would prejudice certain interests, including the extraordinary category of

"the effective conduct of public affairs".

In case that is not enough, there is also a third defence, which is that the reasonable opinion of a qualified person is sufficient to say whether the second defence provides an exemption. That gives legal weight to what can be political opinion.

Three defences are organised around policy development. That is unsustainable. I do not think that the House will think that that is the proper way to proceed. The barricades have gone up with a vengeance. Nobody denies that the Government need a thinking, deliberating space. They need a confidential arena in which policy discussion can take place and policy decisions be made. However, equally, nobody should deny that there is also a public interest in knowing the background information that shapes those policies. That is the key distinction which the Bill fails to recognise.

Mr. Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is making a balanced and well-reasoned contribution. The code that he criticised earlier did not deal with the broad issue of prejudice, but talked about substantial harm. Had the code been introduced as a Bill, presumably it would have satisfied his demand for a narrower definition of exemption, rather than the broad definition in the Bill.

Dr. Wright: To be accurate, the code did not talk about substantial harm. I shall tell the hon. Gentleman in a moment what it said, but I should like to proceed with my argument.

[Dr. Wright]

We are dealing with a crucial distinction. There is no novelty about it. It was first made in the so-called Croham directive back in 1977. It said that "factual and analytical material" would be published once decisions had been taken. The 1994 code said that policy information was to be withheld only if disclosure would

"harm the frankness and candour of internal discussion".

There was a presumption of disclosure under the code. On top of that, the ombudsman could recommend disclosure of exempt information on public interest grounds. There was also a provision for

"facts and the analysis of facts"

to be disclosed. The code continued the tradition begun with Croham back in 1977.

The 1997 White Paper gave us what it called a simple harm test. That was less than the substantial harm test that applied to the rest of the provisions, and was simply a question of whether disclosure would harm something that ought to be protected. We then had discussions about the draft Bill, and the Home Secretary told the Select Committee on Public Administration that the

"issue of factual or background information is important . . . and I think on the whole ought to be disclosed."

Unfortunately, the Bill does not convert that desire into legislative provision, but I am heartened by the fact that it might still do that.

We have had important testimony from people such as the former Cabinet Secretary Lord Butler, who has said that it is perfectly possible to make distinctions of this kind. The civil service will do it if Ministers tell them that that is how they should proceed. We have a cumulative body of evidence which says that it is both desirable and practical to have such distinctions. However, the distinction is not made in the Bill—contrary to the developing practice to which I have pointed, and contrary to freedom of information regimes elsewhere, notably in New Zealand and Ireland.

Hon. Members should be clear about what that means. It means that all information relating in any way to the development of policy—including purely factual background information—stands exempt. I simply do not believe that the House will allow that to be sustained. Clauses 33 and 34 represent the hole in the centre of the Bill. At the very least, we need the facts, and an analysis of them. We must explore whether that needs to be only after decisions are made, as is the case in some other places. It is probably better to have a harm test, as we have with the code and as was proposed in the White Paper. However, we have to do something to fill the gap that clauses 33 and 34 now open up.

We must ask, "Who decides?"—the clause 48 question. The Bill has a tortuous two-stage process governing how we move to discretionary decisions after a first stage of looking at exemptions. We have made progress on the question of who has the last word and who decides on whether, on public interest grounds, there should be disclosure of exempt information. Originally, there was no provision for any role for the Information Commissioner.

I put on record the fact that we have made progress, and we now have a Bill which gives a recommendatory role to the commissioner. In the unlovely language of the Bill, we have a "discretionary disclosure recommendation". I am bound to say that that is not enforceable. It remains unsatisfactory. The Information Commissioner has to have the power to order disclosure in the final resort.

I asked the Home Secretary earlier whether he could think of examples where the Information Commissioner might use this discretionary recommendation provision to recommend disclosure and a Minister or public body would still refuse to disclose. I do not think that he could think of any compelling example, nor is it likely that he could. Remember—behind the commissioner stands a tribunal. Behind the tribunal stands a court on points of law. It is not as though public bodies or Ministers stood frailly exposed to the power of the Information Commissioner.

We have reached an unsatisfactory halfway house. If we are going to legislate, we have to legislate. That means moving from the mentality of codes to a mentality which says that we must give an enforcement and order power to an Information Commissioner. This is what happens elsewhere. It happens in Ireland and New Zealand, and it should happen here.

Knowing that the Information Commissioner has the last word is the real discipline; knowing that someone can get the information out and that it cannot be finally withheld is the crucial discipline. That removes the possibility that public authorities can seek to hide their failures, their incompetence and their shortcomings. It also gives a real underpinning of public confidence if it is known that the Information Commissioner can have the last word in terms of getting information out.

This is one of the issues which go beyond the normal exchanges between the parties. It is about the information rights of citizens and the quality of our democracy. It is too important to entrust to the judgment of the Government alone, because any Government can think—and find reasons for thinking—that they have an interest in withholding rather than disclosing information.

Although I am a long-term enthusiast for this measure, I have never claimed that it will be a panacea, or that it will be a remedy for all the ills of Government. I have never denied that there is a balance to be struck at all times between disclosure and privacy and confidentiality. All that is true.

At the same time, it is not the case—as Governments tend to believe—that the sky will fall in if we move in this direction. The sky did not fall in when the minutes of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England were published. Indeed, government was strengthened, rather than weakened, because of that. That is the kind of example to hang on to; it is where confidence is to be found.

This is a genuinely historic Bill, and it deserves a Second Reading. It already has been improved, and should be improved further. Already, nearly 200 Members of Parliament—including most of the Chairs of Select Committees—have indicated that they would like the Bill strengthened. That is also the overwhelming opinion of people outside the House. The task now for the House is to ensure that that happens.

7.17 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I agree with a great deal of what the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) has just said—particularly that this matter is for the most part beyond the normal conflicts of party politics. I agree also with what he had to say on clause 33.

I wish to congratulate two people. The first is my hon. Friend, and neighbour, the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) who, contrary to the opinion of the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan)—who is just going and who made a long, boring speech—is a significant member of the Conservative party. My hon. Friend has espoused this cause with enormous skill and persistence against some formidable opposition.

I congratulate also the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), who produced an impressive White Paper which, in many ways, changed the debate, particularly as we now know that, at the time, he was under threat of the biggest political insult of all—being replaced in the Cabinet by a Liberal Democrat.

I do not regard it as a step forward that responsibility for freedom of information should now reside with the Home Office. The point has been made that the culture of the Home Office is one of control—police, prisons, immigration and issues of that kind. Officials are sometimes good in that area. However, I am not sure that it is the ideal background as far as freedom of information is concerned.

The Home Secretary, who is not here, talked about his own deeds. I remember that it was in the name of freedom of information that this Home Secretary placed an injunction on the whole of the British press after a few paragraphs had been reported in *The Sunday Telegraph* which pre-empted what the Macpherson report was going to say only a couple of days later.

The Home Secretary has a lot to prove on freedom of information, but so has virtually every Minister who has sat round the Cabinet table in the post-war years. We should show some humility in this exercise. I am personally prepared to say that not every action that I took as Secretary of State for various Departments met the spirit of the White Paper or the code of practice of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). I hope that I learned from that experience. It is better to be a sinner who repents than one who keeps on sinning without thought or regret.

My attitude has changed because I, like the hon. Member for Cannock Chase, have come to believe that an atmosphere of openness is in the interests of good government. That is the fundamental point. It may mean that a Government cannot push things through and cannot so easily disguise what they are doing. It will certainly allow the public to play a bigger part in policy formulation. That is good, not bad news for government.

I disagree with what the White Paper says about the 30-year rule. It says:

"We have examined carefully the case for change and concluded that on balance it is preferable to retain the 30 year rule which is in line with international practice."

That is not the most convincing defence. It makes it sound like some sort of European regulation.

When the White Paper said that, I am sure that Whitehall collectively heaved a great sigh of relief. The rule is utterly outdated. There is a wide range of arguments against it. As a former Cabinet Minister, I want to be around when the papers come out so I can reply to them; I do not want that to be left to some civil servant in the future.

As it happens, because of my exceptional youth when I went into the Cabinet, I will be only just over 70 when the papers are released, but the Home Secretary will be well over 80; he is not very good with police figures now, so goodness knows what he will be like then. When the papers come out on the Government's transport policy—I use the term loosely—the Deputy Prime Minister will be over 90.

There is another practical reason for change, as the 30-year rule has broken down. These days, former Prime Ministers, ex-Chancellors and former Secretaries of State, including myself, all write their memoirs. We all trail either to the Cabinet Office or to our old Departments to look at the papers, the minutes and the decisions, and we all publish as much as we can get past the Cabinet Secretary. The civil service checks the script for accuracy, which in reality means that one cannot make offensive comments about old civil servants with whom one has served—that, at least, is one aspect of the check—and an account is published perhaps 20 years before the official 30-year limit expires.

If that were not bad enough, other Cabinet Ministers publish their diaries, which are certainly much more revealing than any Cabinet minutes that I have seen. Dick Crossman started it, the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) has, I believe, published five volumes of diaries, and now we have a new variation, with the wives of Cabinet Ministers keeping diaries of their husbands' reactions to Cabinet meetings. Lady Richard provides us with a fascinating portrait of the band of chums who make up the present Labour Cabinet.

For all I know, the Home Secretary's wife is keeping a diary. One can imagine the entry, "Jack came home depressed last night, beaten over the head again by that woman from Maidstone." I do not complain about the situation—what with Lady Richard's diary and that of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), Conservatives are having a field day—but it shows the absurdity of the rule.

One of the hopes of politics is that one can learn from mistakes and, having learned, make better policy, but the idea of the 30-year rule is to confine any lessons to irrelevant and dusty history. If some time restriction is needed, a 15 or 20-year rule is much more appropriate.

I am also concerned about clause 33, which covers the formulation of Government policy. Ministers talk of the need for free, unreported discussion and development of policy. I understand that, and I remember how it was, but I also remember cases in which the secrecy of policy formulation led to injustice, especially in relation to relatively technical issues. There were cases which, if the public and Members of Parliament had understood what was happening, would have led to the measure being kicked out.

On the previous occasion when the Conservative party was in opposition, Lady Castle was Secretary of State for Social Services—the Home Secretary was her adviser—and Lord Barnett was Chief Secretary. The Government wanted public expenditure savings. Inflation had been sky high—it was more than 20 per cent.—but it was coming down. At that time, pensions were uprated on an historic measure of inflation: past inflation was validated.

The bright idea was then proposed that pensions should instead be updated by a forecast of inflation. With inflation coming down, a period of past inflation was excluded altogether and pensions were not increased by the amount that they otherwise would have been. That may sound like a technical detail but the result was a

[Sir Norman Fowler]

major public spending saving that would now be worth more than £4 billion a year. When the Chancellor of the day announced the policy, he dressed it up for the House in such a way that, as Lady Castle reports in her diaries, some Labour Back Benchers cheered.

I do not want to make an entirely party political point, as I am sure that comparable issues could be found under Conservative Governments, but the whole intent in that example was to suppress information because the Treasury—I do not blame Lady Castle—feared that, if the public knew what it was about, the policy would be defeated. There would certainly have been a hell of a row, to put it mildly.

I am not convinced that the habits of Whitehall or the Treasury—I bear the scars of public spending round after public spending round when I was responsible for social security and for health—or, indeed, of Ministers, have suddenly changed.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: My right hon. Friend speaks of the scars that he bears. Does he not remember that it was under his aegis at the Department of Health and Social Security that spending was increased in favour of the long-term sick and disabled by £6 billion a year?

Sir Norman Fowler: That is very kind of my right hon. and learned Friend and I am glad that he is still in training to support his old boss. However, I will not prolong the point.

I do not believe that the habits of Departments, officials and Ministers have changed to such an extent that they suddenly want the public to be given the maximum amount of information. To believe that would be wishful thinking. When the Treasury wants to make a public spending cut, it does not go for something obvious, clear and simple. No, it chooses pensions or social security because it hopes to get away with it, given the complexity of those issues.

Another example comes from the Home Office—the Department sponsoring the Bill. The House will remember that, after the injunction on the media that I mentioned, the Home Secretary set up a leak inquiry. It was clear that the leak came from a tight circle of people, because not many people had seen the draft report. I asked the Home Secretary whether Ministers who had access to the Macpherson report before 21 February would be interviewed in the leak investigation. I asked him whether the same applied to officials and ministerial advisers. I did not ask him to name them, but I wanted to know whether they would be interviewed. The reply I received from the Home Secretary, who is now in charge of freedom of information legislation, stated:

"It would not be in the interests of the leak investigation now under way to give these details."—[*Official Report*, 4 March 1999; Vol. 326, c. 855W.]

That is not a heartfelt endorsement of freedom of information. Indeed, it provides the absolute minimum of information.

My fear about the legislation is that it leaves too much to a civil service that is not a great believer in open government and it leaves too much to the decisions of Ministers, who are often no better. I fear that, when the policy was finally given to the Home Office, there was an enormous sigh of relief all the way down Whitehall because people knew they were safe.

One of the fascinating features of the debate has been how many voices have been raised against exemptions such as the one afforded by clause 33, including not only the Campaign for Freedom of Information but the CBI. The Campaign for Freedom of Information makes a good point when it says that one of its main concerns are the many class exemptions that protect all information in a particular class, regardless of whether disclosure would cause harm, and that they should be amended to apply only when disclosure could be shown to be harmful. It is difficult to argue against that case.

Secrecy is not generally in the interests of good government. Openness can remove unjustified logjams. When I carried out my social security review in the mid-1980s, I held public meetings—contrary to the practice of this Government—at which interested parties gave evidence openly. In effect, Ministers acted like a Select Committee. Let us take the example of the death grant. No Government would increase the death grant from about £25 or £30. No Government would reform it or do anything else with it, because the advice was that that would cause an enormous public reaction. It was allowed to continue, even though it was unsatisfactory. When we asked the public, they took the common-sense view that it was better to pay more to those who needed it, instead of paying an inadequate general grant to everyone.

The more open we can make a Government, the better that Government are likely to be. The public have something to contribute, but they cannot do so if the information on policy formulation is withheld. My concern is that the Bill does not guarantee that that contribution can be made. Freedom of information is about being as open as possible and recognising the public's right to know, but above all it should be about making the process of government of this country better than it is.

7.35 pm

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on giving the House the chance to legislate, at long last, on freedom of information. Other right hon. and hon. Members have noted that we have waited a long time—it is 20 years since Sir Clement Freud first introduced a substantive freedom of information Bill, which was prevented from reaching the statute book only by the 1979 election.

More crucial than the long wait is the fact that tonight we are discussing a matter of historic and great constitutional importance. We are determining one of the key elements of the relationship between the citizen and the state—the right of the citizen to know and the powers of Parliament and the Executive to disclose or withhold information. That is the nub of why and how we represent the interests of those who send us to this House. If we can get it right and truly empower the individual citizen and strengthen Parliament in its scrutiny of the Executive, we will have done something of great importance that will last long after most of us have left this House.

Seen from that perspective, the Opposition's position is even more extraordinary. Others have said that the Conservative Government's record was poor. They lurched

from open hostility to the whole principle of legislating on this matter to passive resistance to the private Member's Bill on the right to know that I introduced in 1993. Ministers sat and watched the Bill go through its entire Committee stage without engaging in the argument. At a time when the press was sympathetic to the Conservative Government, that Government were nonplussed to find that every single national newspaper was in favour of that Bill and agreed with the need for legislation. It was that shock that led Lord Waldegrave, as he is now, to introduce a code of practice which contained many good ideas—not least its operation by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration. It was a sensible and good code, but its main weakness was that it did not have the force of statute. We now have the opportunity to ensure that we get the best Bill we can.

The speech by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) was sad and confused. It was difficult to tell whether she was saying that we were not going far enough or whether she would rather we did not leave the station at all. She got herself into a difficult position. The only hope that I gleaned from her demeanour today was from the fact that she listened intently to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark). From her nods and facial reactions to what he was saying, she seemed to be sympathetic to much of my right hon. Friend's powerful, thoughtful and reasoned contribution to the debate.

My right hon. Friend made two especially strong points. He said that the Bill as it is now drafted—it is much improved since it was first published, to the credit of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and his colleagues—has become too complex and too convoluted, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) illustrated when he talked about the three layers of protection to prevent disclosure on something as simple as the size of a Minister's private office.

If hon. Members need to be further convinced about the complexity of the Bill, they should recall the reply that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary gave my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) to a simple question that my hon. Friend has asked before—"How often, and for what duration, does the Cabinet meet?"

The Home Secretary's answer was byzantine in the complexity with which it dealt with the various stages that would have to be gone through before a simple answer could be given to a very simple factual question—an answer along the lines of, "The Cabinet has met on so many occasions, and meets typically for 20 minutes." I think both those examples demonstrate that, to some extent, the Bill has lost some impulsion in its drafting, and has become complex and convoluted. It will be difficult to try to simplify and clarify it in Committee, rather than adding barnacles in the form of additions—albeit helpful ones. I think that the major challenge in Committee will be the need to return simplicity and clarity to what, in some respects, should be a relatively simple Bill.

A purposes clause could help. I am baffled by the Home Secretary's continued refusal to introduce such a clause, given that it would be easy to introduce it in the form of a new clause in Committee. The drafting of the New Zealand clause is clear and helpful. Such a clause would cost the Government nothing, and would not cause them to weaken their strong position in preventing the disclosure of information. It would clarify the Bill, and would send a strong message not only to adjudicators but to the general public.

My right hon. Friend reminded the House that the prime purpose of freedom of information legislation was to empower the citizen. That can be done in two ways. It can be done directly, through the granting of rights to the individual, and indirectly, through the granting of rights and powers to the House of Commons and to outside organisations that campaign on behalf of individual citizens. I believe that, in respect of the direct empowerment of the individual citizen, the Bill will have an amazing effect on people: it will genuinely give them power in regard to information that affects their lives.

When I was steering the Right to Know Bill through its stages in 1993, I received hundreds of letters from members of the public all over the country, telling agonising stories of the destruction of marriages, jobs, careers and income because those concerned could not obtain crucial information. I believe that the present Bill will resolve many difficulties for individual citizens, if we can get the message across—and that means that the Government must promote it.

The Home Secretary has often said that the legislation is not everything, and that its implementation, and the enthusiasm and commitment of Departments in putting it across, will determine whether it is effective. The Government have done a good job: the potential is there, if the message can be conveyed. It is less clear, however, that the Bill in its present form will improve the position in respect of rights exercised through Parliament and campaigning groups. If it is to live up to the aims of the Home Secretary and the Government, we need to do a great deal more work.

As many have said, there are too many "class exemptions". "Class exemption" is a piece of jargon that members of the public may not fully understand; in fact, it refers simply to a class of information that can be withheld even if disclosure would not be in any way harmful. When we hear a class exemption described in that way, we must conclude that it is bizarre that it should exist. Surely, if a piece of information is entirely harmless to government, to the public interest, to the security of the state and to any person, it is nonsensical that it should be withheld, but it is to achieve the withholding of certain information in that category—along with the scoop of other information—that a class exemption is deemed to be necessary.

It is agreed in freedom of information legislation throughout the world that there should be large areas of exemption which, although uniform, apply to different measures, but class exemptions are very different from the test of harm—whether it is a simple test of prejudice or the more important test of substantial harm specified in the White Paper. The Government really ought to consider the matter again; otherwise, the Minister will have a hard job in Committee in trying to justify the scoop of class exemptions that will lead to the gathering of information which—as he will have to acknowledge—is entirely innocuous.

Clause 33, to which Members on both sides of the House referred, deals with the whole question of factual information. Of course, the question of whether factual information behind the development or formulation of policy should be released is crucial. I am thinking of data,

[Mr. Mark Fisher]

analysis, the scientific and technical facts on the basis of which Ministers and their civil servants debate and make decisions; of the cost, and the legal balance of opinion. Only if we as a Parliament, the public and the press can understand such matters will we be in a position to judge whether we are being well governed.

If our role of scrutinising the Executive is to be fulfilled—a role that many people have claimed is being weakened by much of the legislation that has been passed over recent years—we must have the necessary information. Nothing is more depressing than hearing ill-informed debate in the House, and the exchanging of party political slogans across the Chamber. Such debates take place because we cannot engage with the detailed realities of whether a decision has been well made or not well made.

This is a crucial issue, which we must get right. It was encouraging to hear that the Home Secretary would leave the door open to discussion in Committee: he implied that, if we could come up with a form of words that would distinguish between factual information that was helpful to informed debate and scrutiny and would still leave the Government the ability to formulate policy in the privacy of Departments, he would be sympathetic to that. I think the Home Secretary needs to deliver on his assurance, and that we, together with Government, need to find a way of making that possible.

It is interesting that all the matters that we are discussing—the importance of better-informed debate, the need to increase public confidence in the political process and the testing of weakness in government—feature in the Government's White Paper on modernising government. The Government have advocated all those things: they have said that they want to bring about such developments to modernise the way in which we govern ourselves. They say that we must involve other people in policy making as early as possible.

Those are laudable ambitions, but they will be negated if we cannot get at the facts on the basis of which Governments make their decisions. No one denies that there is a difficult balance to be struck, but no balance has been struck in the Bill so far: Ministers will determine all, and that is wrong.

The Home Secretary is an intellectually honest politician, and he accepts that that is not satisfactory. I believe that he has left the door open today. At the moment, the Bill is less good than the code, which has a harm test for facts and analysis, and it is much less good than the Irish legislation, under which factual information can be withheld only if it is contrary to the public interest in the opinion of the independent commissioner. It is also less good than the proposals—albeit provisional—for Scotland, in which facts are not covered by a class exemption. This area must be scrutinised in Committee, and progress must be made, but I am encouraged by the Home Secretary's attitude.

Two more areas of the Bill are weak. The first is part III on the power of the commissioner. He can recommend disclosure, but, unlike in Ireland and New Zealand, and unlike what is proposed for Scotland, he cannot order it. What is the point of a commissioner if he is not sufficiently independent, having come to his conclusions, to make a decision rather than a recommendation?

For 20 or 30 years—indeed, for ever—we have had to accept that all information is given by grace and favour of the Government. The shift from that to legislation should, if we get it right, remove ultimate discretion from the hands of Ministers, except where there is an important prejudicial point to preserve. The Bill fails to harness the potential of legislation in that way. Ultimately, power will remain in the hands of Ministers. There is much declaration in the Bill, and many improvements. However, by leaving crucial decisions to Ministers, the Bill does not significantly change the position that pertains today.

The Home Secretary is never shy about saying that he is a good Minister when it comes to releasing information, and he is correct to say so. He demonstrates that information can be released under the present regime, but only by the grace and favour of Ministers. In many ways, the Bill will not change that, and we must help the Government to amend the Bill so that there is a real change and so that Ministers trust the commissioner and their own Bill to protect what must be protected, rather than trusting only themselves.

Finally, where should the Committee conduct its scrutiny? I believe that the Bill must be taken on the Floor of the House. It is a Bill of enormous constitutional importance, and constitutional Bills are traditionally taken on the Floor of the House. We are sent here by our constituents to represent their interests. The provision of information that would allow us to speak for them on an informed basis goes to the heart of why we are Members of Parliament and how Parliament should operate.

I hope that the other political parties will join some of us in requiring the Government to take the Committee stage on the Floor. The Bill relates to the powers of the Executive and Parliament and is of enormous constitutional importance. The fact that we have reached the legislative stage means that we should give two strong cheers for the Government, but we should withhold the third cheer until we see the final Bill. Within our grasp lies the ability to change the quality of scrutiny and government. We must not fail.

7.54 pm

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) who maintained the tenor of a debate in which we have heard much cross-party melding of opinion in addition to the views of the Government and the admissions of those of us who have been in government that we have not always got matters right.

Disraeli said—I think it was Disraeli; much is attributed to him—that what people want in politics is information. That is absolutely true. The fundamental principle in a free society must be that, unless there are powerful reasons to the contrary, the information necessary to decide and legislate on an issue should be as freely and fully available as possible.

As we have done some party politicking in the debate, I should mention the question of the difference between the Bill, which will put the right to freedom of information on a statutory basis, and the code of practice introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) in 1994, when he was Prime Minister, possibly in response to the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central in 1993.

The code, which was updated by the Conservative Government on 1 February 1997, was a positive step forward, as the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) acknowledged in his distinguished speech.

There is a question as to whether the Bill makes any significant advance on the code of practice, which gave a positive right to facts and analysis that the Government considered relevant in framing major policy proposals. That was valuable. The Bill contains a raft of exemptions—12 detailed pages—between clauses 19 and 43, and one must doubt whether there will be any improvement. When the Select Committee on Public Administration asked journalists for their opinions recently, they said that they could detect scarcely a hair's breadth of difference between the code and the Bill. I suspect that the Bill may even go the other way.

Those who read or hear our debate should understand the point of a "reasoned amendment." The Opposition have been criticised for tabling an amendment that says that the Bill should not receive a Second Reading. This aspect of parliamentary procedure needs modernisation. It is ridiculous that an Opposition cannot criticise a Bill on the Order Paper without demanding that it should not be given a Second Reading. That is one of the fatuities that sometimes arise from procedural developments that grow up in the House. One goes to the Table Office to be told that that is how the amendment has to be. Until that problem is resolved, we shall have no more sensible formal procedure for saying that we welcome a Bill but wish to record by vote that certain changes should be made to it.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Not having been a Minister in the previous Government, I have just discovered precisely that point. We felt that we should put down a marker tonight to show that we were dissatisfied with the Government's performance over key aspects of the Bill.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I found out the point when I tabled a reasoned amendment to an earlier Bill in this Parliament.

The defect of the Bill is that it is too restrictive and has too many exemptions. There must be a significant number of exemptions. No one would disagree that defence, foreign relations, criminal prosecutions and some areas of the economy require substantial exemptions. However, the harm test provided is much too loose. The Home Secretary obviously realises that, because he avoided referring to it as prejudice during the first 10 minutes of his speech. As he spoke, I fumbled through the Bill to try to find the word "harm". I challenge Ministers to do so. I think that it is always called "prejudice" or "likelihood of prejudice", which is even weaker.

The Matrix Churchill case and the Scott report have been discussed. I have an exceptional knowledge of that case, for obvious reasons. The Scott inquiry was held in public and the report was published. If one reads it, one can be well informed about the matter. The difficulty is that, rather like the Bill, the report was infinitely too long, with the result that no one can read it—there is not enough time in a lifetime to read much of what it says. That report made it clear that the public interest test is whether there is real harm or serious harm to the public interest. I doubt whether any lighter test really means anything. One can always argue that something is prejudicial.

The second point to be made, when comparing with this Bill matters that were rightly matters for public debate at that time, is that I agree with Sir Richard Scott about the candour argument—I did not agree with him about everything and we did not agree about the law, so it is nice for me to be able to say that I was right and he was wrong. But it is true that there must be opportunities for Ministers and officials to talk candidly and in private to each other. Those matters should not be widely reported—they should not necessarily be reported at all. However, one should limit as much as possible any restricting of the background information that surrounds such candid discussions.

Without breaching Cabinet secrecy, I will give one example of the sort of candid discussions that must be able to take place. On an extremely important matter—which hon. Members would have approached from very much the same point of view from whichever side of the House they came—one of our senior and distinguished colleagues said exactly the opposite thing on two successive days and gave powerful reasoning for each view. Both arguments were valuable parts of the debate that led to what I think was the right decision in difficult circumstances. Had they been reported, however, it would have looked pretty stupid. There is a genuine right to protect candour to that extent, but it should be to the minimum extent necessary. All the surrounding facts that can be brought into the public domain without serious harm to the public interest should be.

It is difficult to know exactly what powers should be given to the ombudsman who is to supervise, but the powers in the Bill are too weak. One of the interesting aspects of the Committee and Report stages will be to decide how much to leave to the commissioner or the ombudsman.

I do not like the idea of taking away ministerial responsibility, because one of the advantages of Ministers' having responsibility—this is a constitutional point—is that they can be questioned about their opinion in a way that officials cannot. Unless a Minister is put under huge pressure to divulge information, however, his Department will be on his back urging him to be as secretive as possible, and he may be inclined to be secretive.

If the commissioner says that something should be divulged but the Minister thinks that it should not, perhaps the matter should come before the House on a motion similar to that on an order, so that the House can express a view. I suggest that for consideration, rather than as a final conclusion.

Certain aspects of secrecy which will be continued by the Bill worry me greatly. Clause 30, which deals with court records, require that any document served by a public authority for the purpose of court proceedings is automatically exempt. That is dangerous. Since we passed the European convention on human rights into our domestic law—indeed, since European law came into our domestic law—and since judicial review became such an important part of public administration, and I am now going back 25 or 30 years, what is argued in the courts needs to be more openly available to the public and better understood by them.

Valuable documents are produced for every case nowadays. They are known as the skeletons of argument and are put forward by counsel on behalf of one party or

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

another and, in particular, on behalf of Government. In a recent case, the Crown *v.* Keberline, the Lord Chief Justice thought it right effectively to strike down anti-terrorist legislation. That was a big step, but he would not have done it if he had not thought it necessary. The skeleton of the argument that was put forward—on behalf of the Crown on that occasion—would be extremely valuable for public debate. Indeed, it is an entirely public document, as it has been used and referred to in court.

Thirty years ago, the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) was battling on behalf of what is now called Liberty but was then the National Council for Civil Liberties I think, to be allowed to reveal or justify herself for having revealed documents that had been used in court. No lesser person than the present Lord Chief Justice—as a recently appointed High Court judge—conducted a public inquiry into the matter and made recommendations. The point of those recommendations, which the House subsequently enacted into law, was that documents that had been used in court should thereafter be in the public domain.

I have been asking parliamentary questions—I still await the answer to one—about whether the Minister responsible for transport will put in the Library the skeleton of argument in the great fisheries case of Factortame. The question has been shifted to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and I am waiting to find out whether that Department will cough up the answer.

Those documents, which are produced for a public purpose, should be in the public domain. The courts are getting more political powers. Journalists and Members of Parliament should be able to see, and the public should be able to read, what they are saying. That is an important part of open government.

I agree with those who have said that the Bill is incredibly complex. It is only an 80-clause Bill. If I had not been sitting here for the past three hours, I would have been in the Standing Committee considering the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which has 350 clauses. Neither Bills need be anything like as long. The Financial Services and Markets Bill could probably have been dealt with in 100 clauses maximum, and in 50 rather than 200 pages. It would have been a much better Bill for that.

As the right hon. Member for South Shields said, these provisions could probably have been dealt with in 15 or 20 clauses—then it would have been possible to read it. Bills such as this are impossible for a layman to read, and no lawyer would read them without being paid. It is plain wrong that we should continue to legislate in this way. I hope that there will be more and more complaints about that, and that the message will get through to the Cabinet Office and to the parliamentary draftsmen. Ultimately, it is the Government's responsibility and, with their help, the parliamentary draftsmen will put their heads together and we will get a new style of drafting.

Yes, the situation was getting worse while the Conservatives were in power and I will not deny that, but it has got gallopingly worse in the past couple of years. I do not particularly blame the Government—except that they were not alert to what was happening. They should wake up and let us have simpler, clearer and briefer legislation—and that applies to this Bill.

Mr. Maclennan: As a matter of historical record, will the right hon. and learned Gentleman clear this up? Which Ministers are responsible for the parliamentary draftsmen? When I had a lowly position in government, it was certainly a matter over which no departmental Minister had control.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: It is a good question. In my experience, the Attorney-General and Solicitor-General had a close relationship with parliamentary draftsmen. We regarded ourselves as the Ministers who should speak up when they felt beleaguered, as they sometimes did. The usual reason why they feel beleaguered is that they receive instructions for Bills far too late and are then expected to have done it by yesterday. I do not think that there is a Minister with responsibility for the parliamentary draftsmen. If there is, I ask the Minister in this Government to put his hand up. I think that the Minister in charge of each Bill is responsible in some way for the parliamentary draftsmen of that Bill. The problem is one of overall ethos, and it needs to be corrected.

I welcome the Bill, but it has serious faults, which have been rightly identified by hon. Members on both sides of the House. When the Conservatives come back into Government—everyone knows that we have to contemplate that imminent possibility—we do not need to be scared about strengthening the Bill. That is what we should do.

8.11 pm

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I am delighted to participate in the debate because freedom of information and the right to know is something to which I have been committed all my life, especially since I have been involved in politics. The first sign of maturity in small children is when they ask the question why. We carry on from there to the days when I was a member of the Committee that considered the Right to Know Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) in the previous Parliament. I welcome the opportunity to be the Labour Member to speak after him.

We have had an interesting debate so far. I hope that I shall not tread over the ground that other people have trodden very adequately, but I want to make a few specific points. The first is about the Bill's scope. We have become slightly bogged down with it as a Bill relating to Government and Ministers. I was impressed by schedule 1, which lists almost 500 bodies to which the Bill relates. They range from the adjudicator for the Inland Revenue, through the BBC, the Countryside Agency, the Environment Agency and, going down the list in alphabetical order, to the Tate gallery and the Zoos Forum. We sometimes mistakenly think that we are talking simply about Ministers' commitment to a presumption of openness. I want a Bill that lays down that presumption of openness for the whole scope of the establishment that runs our lives.

Still on the matter of scope, I was interested that the 500 organisations did not include the Child Support Agency, the Benefits Agency or what I might call the

Of-family—Ofwat, Oftel, Oflot and so on, the regulatory agencies. Why are they not on the list? My constituents seek information about the reasons for decisions that affect their lives taken by the CSA, the Benefits Agency and the regulators as often as they do about decisions taken by Ministers. It is important to get it right.

I appreciate that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary believes in openness. He has done a magnificent job in putting openness into legislation, being open to suggestions, improving his Bill and introducing it in this first Parliament—something that Labour members have argued for. However, the Bill has to affect the other bodies to which I have referred, which may not have a presumption of openness and will take their lead from Ministers. So we come back to why it is so important to get it right and put an assumption of openness in every clause.

It is something of a lost opportunity that so much emphasis is placed on exemptions. I suspect that the public bodies affected by the Bill and which dominate our lives are not making representations about the Bill to Ministers because they think, "Oh, we need not worry about it. There are all these exemptions. If something crops up, we can always say that we do not need to make something public because to do so might affect the efficiency of our organisation or prejudice the effective conduct of our affairs." They may quote clauses 33 and 34, which relate to Government Departments. Other bodies may take those clauses to apply to them when they want to be less than open about a mistake that they have made.

In 1984, the Conservative Government introduced the access to information code. At that time, I chaired a local government committee in Sheffield city council. I was even then committed to openness so I welcomed the code. I remember standing up and saying that it was probably the only thing that that Government had thought up with which I had any sympathy.

As chair of the committee, I used to examine the care with which officers had placed their reports in part 1 or part 2 of the committee agenda. I could not help noticing that when the timetable had slipped, spending was over budget or a department had not performed as well as a council department ought to, there was more inclination to place a report in part 2, which was not open to public scrutiny, than in part 1. That brings me back to the general point of the legislation. We are talking about a Bill which will have to deal with public authorities with their backs to the wall, fighting not to disclose something that inadvertently, for either a small or a big reason, has gone wrong.

Other hon. Members have contrasted the code, which attempted to separate facts and information from policy guidance, with the Bill. From my experience in local government, I do not believe that it is impossible for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to find a perfectly adequate way of arranging the submission of policy advice so that a distinction is made between the information on which officials present their advice and the informal interpretation of that information, which they may want to talk through with a Minister in the light of a party's policy. It is clearly not appropriate for those discussions to be held in public, but the information and the facts on which they are based should be public. With a presumption of openness in Departments and public authorities, that would not be impossible—indeed, it is desirable. Without it, the ground will be cut from under the worthy aspirations of the Bill.

One example of a public authority with its back to the wall occurred in relation to the tragedy at Hillsborough. I mention that because the tragedy took place in my constituency and was important to the people whom I represent. I have told my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary of my genuine concern about the exemption clauses on potential criminal prosecution. The two senior police officers at Hillsborough on that day are facing private criminal prosecutions, although they are no longer members of the South Yorkshire police force. There was a huge desire, not just in Sheffield but in Liverpool, that the full facts and the detailed information held by the police on every aspect of their management of that terrible tragedy—whether video cameras were running and so on—should be open to the public and made available. The Bill must be cognisant of such circumstances and cover them.

That leads me to the powers and role of the commissioner. In especially sensitive circumstances, there will be disagreement—although not frequently—in respect of the discretionary provisions of the Bill and the balance as to who should have the final say. It would be better to view the establishment and the public authorities as Goliath and ordinary citizens as David, with the Members of Parliament who represent them trying to err on the side of David. As other hon. Members have pointed out, we should trust an independent person to make the final decision, even though, as Members of Parliament, we might find the decision embarrassing.

Several hon. Members said that we live in a secret society where matters are closed to us. That is not true. In this country, we live in an incredibly free society. We vote often; we have a free press; we do not have a big illiteracy problem; and we can demonstrate, like the farmers at the Labour party conference—even Tommy Archer was acquitted of destroying a field of genetically modified crops.

Despite all that, however, individuals often find themselves at the mercy of the establishment. I would like some assurances from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and Home Office Ministers that they will take the Bill slowly, that they will not get entrenched in their own arguments but will be prepared to listen to the arguments of hon. Members, and of those outside this place, and that they will be prepared further to strengthen the Bill.

I have made those points for two reasons. The first is political, almost romantic: this country needs to defend its freedoms. This Parliament needs to defend those freedoms on behalf of the country; and the Labour party, which has taken so many steps forward on minority rights and human rights, and now on freedom of information, needs to defend its proud tradition.

The second reason is purely pragmatic: we do not want to pass a Bill that will be out of date almost before it reaches the statute book. We need to acknowledge the power of the internet and of communications, and the rapidity with which information goes international. Information is on the internet; it is open to Europe and to the world. Commercial confidentiality may become a thing of the past, when so much commerce is carried out on the internet. Injunctions to stop publications have

[Helen Jackson]

already become almost worthless, because before we know where we are, we can read all about it on the internet.

Let us get this important measure on to the statute book in a state that takes us into the next century.

8.26 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) did her constituents proud. We do indeed live in a land of liberty where none of us fear to express what we feel. The essence of a freedom of information Bill is to give us the information with which to focus the expression of our arguments. After 20 years as a Member of Parliament, I realise that it is not freedom of speech that Governments fear, but freedom of the equality of argument—where the other side knows the facts as well. That is when the public—through us, as their elected representatives—begin to appreciate the dimensions of an argument.

I have noticed a subtext in the House tonight: the truth is that the Bill is pretty awful. However, it can be amended. Indeed, an early-day motion, supported by at least 140 Labour Members, expressed a wish for amendment of two aspects of the Bill. That seems to be a reasonable request.

The House also seems to be expressing something wider. It is saying that it understands the difficulties of Government. "Heaven alone knows", some Labour Members are saying, "we suffered nearly 18 years of Conservative Government", but they have set their backs resolutely to a more rational, forward-thinking Bill and Parliament.

After less than two years, a Government and a Prime Minister proclaimed something about freedom of information in which I profoundly believe. They reached out to many beyond this House—beyond the narrow confines of the politicians who sit here. They said that we, as a people, have a right to the information that forms public policy and thus helps to shape our lives. Indeed, the laws that we make in this place can impose criminal sanctions on those who do not obey them. That is why the process of law making and the central functions of government are of crucial importance in the evaluation of any freedom of information legislation.

I do not mock the Government for the width of their Bill. I have heard no evidence to the Public Administration Committee that has criticised the Government for extending the provisions across an extremely broad front. However, the activities of central Government are at the heart of freedom of information, and in that area the Bill is notably deficient—I use strong words because I can see the gentle pushing of the Government's supporters to turn the Bill round and make it something substantial, and I would not want to say or do anything that harms a wholly proper, intelligent and sensible course of action, to which I hope the Government will accede.

My right hon. Friends who have spoken have tried to give expression to the practical experience of Ministers, and, in suggesting what needs to be done, they have centred on some of the common ground shared by those of us who believe in freedom of information. It is true that the Bill is inordinately complex. The principle of freedom of information—the presumption that information should be available—is fairly simple. All information should be available unless it causes serious harm. The question that follows from that is, how do we weigh that serious harm? People like me have, for a long time, advocated that decisions should be taken on a case-by-case basis—not by classes, because those, as has been pointed out by hon. Members from both sides of the House, produce absurdities.

The Home Secretary was speaking as though any information about the formation of policy would cause the Government to collapse and would do irreparable harm, but then he was probed and tested on the truth of something that, for many years, was held to be the most sensitive area of central Government information—interest rate changes. For many years, Ministers resigned if they leaked such information. Governments trembled at the thought that the reasoning that had led to decisions on interest rates should be known to a wider public. Yet my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) instituted a system whereby that information—that policy advice, no less—was made available after a short time.

I believe that the judgment of the world at large, and of most Members of the House, would be that that process turned out to be not only appropriate, but successful. The two things do not often go together at times in our post-war history, but that is what happened—and when the new Government, elected in 1997, came to office, they placed that system on a statutory footing, and the Monetary Policy Committee now publishes its deliberations after a time.

I cite one instance to show why decisions should be taken on a case-by-case basis. There will be, and there are, matters that cause every one of us, on a prima facie reading of the information, to think that that information may touch upon the security of the state, which is one of the blanket exemptions. As a consequence, all information on MI5 and MI6 is exempt for the purposes of the Bill—and I see hon. Members nodding in absolute agreement that those bodies should be beyond an inquiry. All information would be exempt, including the fact that someone is fiddling the books, or the fact that someone—well, we all know the history of section 2 of the Official Secrets Act 1911.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), promoter of the notable Right to Know Bill, said that the measure should be debated by a Committee of the whole House, and that must be right. The Home Secretary said that the Bill was a Government Bill of the first importance. He laboured the point about the Bill's importance by saying that it was a constitutional Bill and was part of the Government's pledge. I accept all that; it is just one those things. However, what issue was he addressing? He was not dealing with the point that the Bill should be considered on the Floor of the House—he was repudiating something that had happened before, and this House moves by precedent. However, the Official Secrets Act 1989 is the other side of the mirror and it was discussed on the Floor of the House. As a constitutional measure, that is where this Bill should be considered. I start from the confused position that this is a much lesser Bill than all the proclamations surrounding it have suggested. However, it can be made something of, and I hope that the Government will listen to that plea.

I return to the words of the Prime Minister, to the Campaign for Freedom of Information and to the arguments adduced. In the evidence given to the Public Administration Committee, we heard a wonderful justification for the Bill from Lord Lester and I have always argued with a little rubric of my own. First, to honour the hon. Member for Hillsborough, we should remember who we are as citizens of a free, great democracy; ours is a fine system of government by and large. Secondly, how can one have accountable government if one does not know what the Government are doing? Freedom of information is absolutely essential to accountable government. Thirdly, do we not all think that, if a question is considered and more widely debated, the quality of the decisions will be better? Fourthly, freedom of information reinforces ethical government and ethics in government.

I do not believe that the Scott inquiry or the circumstances of the non-disclosure of the relaxation on the export of armaments would have come about if there had been wider discussion. There is an odd contradiction in our system. It is only when we are in crisis and when something goes badly wrong that we resort—to cover our backs for whatever reason—to a public inquiry. What does a public inquiry give us? It does not give us the pretensions and presumptions of this very limited Bill. Instead, all the facts are brought out to the discomfiture of every element that has combined to create the very repressions and restrictions in the Bill.

In the Scott inquiry, we saw the lack of ethical conduct by civil servants, the shortchanging, the blind eyes turned to the law of the land, and the conduct of Ministers exposed. Do we seriously believe that that system of conduct of government could have been maintained if we had had proper freedom of information legislation? The very fact that people know that their conduct and the way in which they have conducted their office may be open to scrutiny keeps them, as often as not, on the straight and the narrow.

I do not know whether the House thinks that my remarks are a cheer for the Bill or a damnation of it. I know, however, that Members of the House of Commons can make this a proper Freedom of Information Bill.

8.38 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd). Although I may disagree with him about some aspects of the Bill, he has a long and distinguished track record in arguing in the House for proper freedom of information legislation.

I come to the debate as a relatively new Member, who began to consider the issue as part of the Select Committee on Public Administration. I confess that I started off partly infected by the belief that freedom of information was an issue for the chattering classes—for politicians and journalists, but for no one else. Having considered the draft Bill and taken part in the Select Committee's inquiries, I have to say that nothing could be more profoundly wrong, because the importance of freedom of information legislation is in the rights that it gives to individual citizens.

We live in an increasingly complex society, where public authorities hold more and more information and often base on it important decisions that profoundly affect the lives of our citizens. If democracy is to function effectively, it is essential that citizens have access to that information and can scrutinise and challenge those decisions. They should also be able to play an effective part in the decision-making process. They should be partners in the process of change, not simply passive subjects. A proper freedom of information regime ought to facilitate that.

Such a regime is essential to the functioning of a modern democracy, the exercise of citizens' rights and their participation in that democracy. That participation should be continuous and should not be limited to exercising the right to vote at the ballot box every four or five years. Used properly, the Bill should be an instrument to achieve that. Despite some of my caveats about the Bill, it represents a great step forward in giving citizens rights.

Of course, such scrutiny of information by the public will never be comfortable for an Executive of any party. It is right that scrutiny should be a little uncomfortable; otherwise it would not be working effectively. The Government are to be commended for having brought to the House for the first time proposals for a statutory right to freedom of information. That is the big change that we are debating today. As hon. Members have said, the code of practice had many points to recommend it, but it did not give people a statutory right to freedom of information, whereas this Bill does.

Properly used, the Bill should lead to more informed debate and more open and better decision making. There is too much unnecessary secrecy in this country, and that secrecy is the enemy of good government and proper decision making.

The Bill is not perfect—no Bill is—but it has been greatly improved by the pre-legislative scrutiny that it has undergone. In that connection, it is only right to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), who, as Chairman of the Select Committee, guided those deliberations and evidence sessions with great skill. It is right also to say that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary demonstrated a great deal of commitment to that process and a willingness to spend time with the Select Committee and engage in that debate. He has not accepted all of our arguments, which, on any objective assessment, are entirely right, but we live in hope of his conversion on one or two points.

None the less, it would be wrong to underestimate the great strides and vast number of improvements that have been made since the draft Bill was published. The time for compliance with requests for information has been reduced from 40 days to 20 working days, as the Select Committee suggested. The Information Commissioner has been given much greater powers in respect of publication schemes, which will in themselves start to change the culture within which public authorities operate. Steps have also been taken, as the Committee suggested, to prevent authorities from using the exemptions relating to future publication to avoid disclosure.

It is particularly noteworthy that two of the provisions in the draft Bill that were most criticised—clause 37, which was the so-called "jigsaw exemption", and the provision to allow local authorities to refuse to disclose information on the grounds of self-incrimination—have been completely removed from the Bill that is now before the House. That represents a great stride forward.

[Helen Jones]

We have made some progress on the discretionary provisions in the Bill. The Select Committee requested that there should be an explicit provision that, unless there was a compelling argument to the contrary, public interest should always be regarded as coming down in favour of disclosure. That was right and proper. Although we have not got there yet, clause 13 contains a requirement that any public authority should balance the public interest in disclosure against the public interest in maintaining an exemption. Together with the Information Commissioner's right to consider those decisions and make recommendations when an authority decides not to disclose information, that is a major step forward in ensuring that public interest is part of an authority's deliberations.

That, however, highlights one of the flaws in the Bill. Where possible, freedom of information provisions should contain statutory enforceable rights and the presumption should be in favour of disclosure. The Bill has moved some way towards that position. We have clause 1, and the title of the Bill has been changed from that of the draft Bill, which made provision about disclosure of information, to one making provision for disclosure of information. However, it does not yet go far enough.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) said that the Bill would be improved by a purpose clause, and I agree with that. The argument has been advanced that that would tip the balance of the Bill wrongly. I am convinced by the evidence given by the Data Protection Registrar to the Select Committee that such a purpose clause could be drawn up properly to ensure that the balance between individual privacy and the right to know is preserved. It would also make it clear that the presumption in interpreting all parts of the Bill should be in favour of disclosure. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will consider that further in due course.

We have heard too much about the exemption for policy making. I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has said that he will reconsider it. There is a balance to be struck, and the Select Committee heard about the post-it notes philosophy that is prevalent in some regimes where there is total disclosure. I am sure that we can produce a form of words that will allow factual advice to be disclosed while ensuring that Ministers and others can discuss policy and advice without fear of that getting into the public arena too soon.

The Bill could be improved in respect of the commercial confidentiality exemption. It is right and proper that there should be a class exemption for trade secrets. I doubt whether any of us would argue against that. However, the Bill as drafted allows far too much commercial information to remain confidential because it would be deemed to prejudice a firm's commercial interests. There should be an explicit public interest test to balance the test of whether something would prejudice a firm's commercial interests. Where a commercial interest should properly be protected, public safety should come before that. As drafted, the Bill would prevent disclosure or allow firms to avoid disclosure of information about defective products or products that cause harm to the public. That cannot be justified.

The powers of the Information Commissioner have been mentioned frequently in the debate. I agree that, with regard to the discretionary provisions in the Bill, the Information Commissioner should have powers to order disclosure. To maintain otherwise is not consistent with moving from a code of practice to a Bill that gives people statutory rights. I am not convinced by the argument that Ministers are accountable to Parliament, whereas an Information Commissioner is not. The Information Commissioner will be a Crown appointee responsible to the House. The line of accountability could be maintained in that way.

I welcome the Bill, but I ask my right hon. and hon. Friends to reconsider those provisions. It seems hard that we should pick out what is wrong with the Bill, but I hope that they will accept that we do so in a constructive spirit. Despite its flaws, the Bill represents a major step forward in citizens' rights. It is a landmark piece of legislation.

I fail to understand the argument of the Opposition, who would vote against the Bill rather than constructively amend it in Committee. That is a step backwards indeed. It is tantamount to telling citizens, "You have information at the discretion of Government, but you have no statutory rights." It is an argument that cannot be maintained. I urge hon. Members to reject the Opposition motion and vote for giving the Bill a Second Reading, so that we can improve it still further.

8.51 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I propose to follow some of the points made by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson), who made an admirable speech, full of common sense.

I do not approach the issue from the perspective of a freedom of information enthusiast—not for its own sake, in any event. For any measure that comes before the House on that subject, my test is whether it makes democracy and government work better. It is a simple test and, in some respect, the Bill fails it.

I agree with those who say that our present system is too secretive. One of the reasons Whitehall takes on so many first class brains and occasionally turn out second-class results is that much of our policy consideration is too secret. There are plenty of proper exclusions. Anyone who, like me, has worked in the Foreign Office as a Minister, particularly at security command or in negotiations, would know that many subjects should not appear in the public domain instantaneously.

However, that should not be applied across the board. The class exemption applying to all information relating to formulation and development of Government policy, including factual information, is a ludicrous blanket exemption.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and interested in what he said about his experience at the Foreign Office. He will remember that, earlier this year, I wrote to him and asked him to release papers relating to his conduct as a Minister at the Foreign Office, in the interests of freedom of information and transparency of government, and he declined to do so. Can he explain why he has changed his mind, if that is what he has done?

Mr. Davis: It is a pity that the hon. Gentleman brings the debate down to that level. He was not seeking freedom

of information at all. First, no one made any allegation about my behaviour. If the hon. Gentleman wants to do so outside, we can test it in the court. Mr. McGilligan, the ambassador at the time, made it clear that I behaved entirely honourably.

Secondly, the papers to which the hon. Gentleman refers cover sensitive matters. Thirdly, they are past Government papers and therefore subject to strong limitations. Fourthly, that intention comes as hypocritical in the extreme from a supporter of a Government whose Prime Minister does not even publish a transcript of a meeting with Bernie Ecclestone, which is not a sensitive matter, and then goes on to claim that he supports freedom of information.

On the substantive issue—the blanket exemption that applies to factual and other information relating to policy matters—there are two areas in which the civil service security blanket could be removed: first, with regard to factual matters, and secondly, with regard to the options available to Ministers. Most Ministers do not make decisions entirely on the basis of their own experience. They are offered a series of options by civil servants. Broadly, those options should not be secure. It would be useful for Parliament to know what the Government were choosing between, what other options were available and whether all the options had been presented to the Minister. It is a rare Minister who invents options of his own unless he knows the subject well.

Information about the options available and the factual basis on which decisions are made—not the recommendations themselves; the civil service does not have to defend itself—will improve the whole basis of public decision making. The public will have a better understanding of decision making at ministerial level, there will be a better policy debate at the time and, after the event, there will be a better review of ministerial performance. For all those reasons, it would be worth while to amend the Bill to include such a provision.

Such a measure would undoubtedly also lead to better advice. Robin Butler made that point when giving evidence earlier on the matter. Civil servants, knowing that the judgments would be much more exposed to public consideration, would give better and more considered advice. It would also be practical. Both Robin Butler and Terry Burns have argued that the provision of advice, evidence and options could be separated out. For all those reasons, this would be a worthwhile addition to the Bill and would pass my test by improving democracy and government.

I missed part of the speech made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell). I would specifically reduce the exclusion relating to Law Officers' advice. Having been a Minister, I know that Law Officers' advice is virtually set in tablets of stone. It would be greatly to the advantage of Parliament to know precisely what the Law Officers' advice was, because that sharply constrains Government's decision making and options. All that information should be available.

Quite a strong harm test would have to be applied. One of the weapons that Ministers employ when negotiating with other countries, be it on Europe or security matters, is to look hard at the modus operandi of other Governments. If matters were opened up, extra information would be given to those negotiating against us, so the harm test would have to be subtle and thorough. Nevertheless, that should be achievable.

Who will decide what should and should not be released? One group of people who should not decide are those who are affected by disclosure. If we are not careful, that is what will happen in many circumstances. Even the best of intentions can lead to the wrong outcome. As a Cabinet Minister, I asked the chief medical officer why we could not publish hospital performance data. His response was that a certain tabloid newspaper would have the headline "House of Death" over the picture of a hospital. Sadly, I moved on before I was able to pursue the matter. I hope that I would have resolved it in favour of publication.

Given what has happened in Bristol and elsewhere since, I regret enormously that I was not able to stick with the issue. The chief medical officer was making a well-intentioned argument. He did not want to destroy the morale or the management of the NHS, which was his responsibility, but one can see only too clearly how such a well-intentioned aim is not always to the advantage of the public at large.

Mr. Mackinlay: In the recent Kosovo conflict, we understand that the Attorney-General advised the Government on the legality of NATO's action, and that that advice cannot, and will not, be disclosed. However, it is material to us in politics to know what that advice was, and that is the sort of thing that could, and should, be disclosed.

Mr. Davis: That is a very good example of the type of legal advice—equivalent to the Law Officers' advice—that I was describing earlier, and I can think of no reason why such advice should not be disclosed. Although I appreciate that, over time, the Law Officers and other lawyers have made the current arrangements to suit themselves, I do not think that it is necessarily worth while for us to continue with those arrangements.

Recently, the Intelligence and Security Committee had a press conference on the matter of the MI5 and MI6 buildings. Just before the previous general election, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), my predecessor as Public Accounts Committee Chairman, recommended that spending on those buildings should be put into the public domain. Immediately after the election, I made the same request. The Intelligence and Security Committee has also made the request. Although we have not received a reply, I suspect that we shall receive one.

When we do receive a reply, hon. Members should ask themselves what harm has consequently resulted. There will be no loss to the national interest, but there may some loss to individual interests. Cui bono will be a good test to apply in making that assessment.

Time and again, Public Accounts Committee members have come across matters that should have been put in the public domain long before the National Audit Office got to them, but which were not put in the public domain because the people deciding on disclosure were also involved in the matter. If the decision on disclosure were not strictly for the commissioner, the people involved in resignations—such as those of the heads of various education institutes, of English Heritage, and of the South Birmingham health authority—would be the ones who were influential in a

[Mr. Davis]

decision on disclosure. The proper outcome, therefore, is that the Commissioner should have the power to decide—not only to recommend—disclosure, subject only to appeal to the information tribunal.

There is a subtle implication in the proposal, and it is for whistleblowers. Now, properly and rightly, we have protection for whistleblowers, but it is still a risky exercise for whistleblowers to rely entirely on that protection. Current protection might protect one in one's current job, but it will not protect one's career prospects. It is therefore brave—sometimes perhaps even idiosyncratic or eccentric—to be a whistleblower.

If the Bill's provisions on disclosure operate properly, a whistleblower would simply have to say to someone, "Ask this question," and the risk to the whistleblower would be eliminated. That is a very important element of the legislation.

In my role as Public Accounts Committee Chairman, I am for ever coming across matters that the National Audit Office has discovered and that, in the public interest, we have subsequently exposed. Unless a whistleblower acts, that is the only way in which problems, improprieties and injustices might be exposed. If those matters are not exposed, the public interest will not be served. If nothing else, the Bill will help us in pursuing that objective.

9.2 pm

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): It is a privilege to participate in a debate that has consistently been of a high standard. I have also agreed with much of what has been said by hon. Members on both sides the House. Nevertheless, the shadow Home Secretary would have done better to read the Bill before coming to the House to castigate it.

I welcome the Bill—whatever its deficiencies, it is a major step forward. Although much has been said about the code of practice, the code is limited in scope and, ultimately, is voluntary. The Bill will confer new and statutory rights on citizens. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) said very clearly, the Bill will give citizens new rights of access to information about the way in which their daily lives are administered—the bread and butter issues that really affect how millions of British people live.

People will be able to obtain information on the way in which local government makes its decisions and health authorities and hospitals develop their priorities; on the conduct of police and the Prison Service; and on how local schools are run, admissions policies are operated, and further education is managed. Even more than central Government—and certainly more than the internal workings of Whitehall and ministerial offices—those are the institutions, agencies and organisations that dominate the daily life of the people whom we represent, and it would be a big mistake to overlook that fact.

When the Bill is passed, it will enfranchise and empower millions of people across the United Kingdom. I am more interested in the men and women whom I represent in my constituency than in the journalists on *The Guardian* and other distinguished newspapers who would like to know every last bit of tittle-tattle that passes between advisers in a Minister's office, important and titillating as that might occasionally be.

The Bill must be considered in the context of a broad and radical programme of constitutional reform. Power has been devolved to Scotland, Wales, and—historically—in the past week to Northern Ireland. A strategic authority for London is about to be established. At last, we have incorporated the European convention on human rights in our legislation. We have made an important start on reforming the House of Lords, and the Government have introduced the Representation of the People Bill. All those measures give up power from the centre and yield the Government's power to the people. Giving up information is another way of yielding power. It is no coincidence that Governments who exercise the greatest control over information tend be the most repressive Administrations—those who most eagerly and efficiently deny power to the people.

The process is not without difficulty and the translation from White Paper to draft Bill and then to Bill has not been easy. However, the Government should be commended for tackling challenges from which previous Governments of all parties have shied away, and for admitting, as the Home Secretary did this afternoon, that further amendments could improve the Bill and strengthen the rights that it confers on citizens. That process demonstrates the exercise of democracy. It is the dialectic of a proposition that is argued, criticised and improved. The process involves the exchange of ideas, to find common ground and consensus and to identify and isolate important issues of principle about which we cannot agree. In great matters of constitutional reform, all parties should strive together to find a solution.

I commend the process that has already been undertaken. As other hon. Members have said, the new and welcome practice of introducing draft legislation, especially to Select Committees, has been vindicated. There was widespread consultation on the White Paper. The Select Committee on Public Administration let the Government know its views. The draft Bill that followed was, in some ways, a retreat from the principles of the White Paper, but in others, it strengthened the Bill, not least by providing for tribunals. The Select Committee commented constructively on the draft Bill. Dialogue between the Select Committee and those who framed the legislation proceeded. The Bill that we are considering is better than the draft Bill in many respects, but it is capable of further improvement.

For all the dialectic, exchange of views and continual modification, the Bill remains flawed. The Home Secretary sets great store by the need for the culture of secrecy to be changed, and by his expectation that that will happen. He is right to say that that there is a culture of secrecy and control in Whitehall and Westminster and that it should be changed. We need to shift the presumption in the way that we are governed from secrecy to openness. That will create a radical change in the relationship between the citizen and the state. It will shift the balance between the rights of the citizen to demand that the Government be accountable at all times and the state's ability to control information and the administration of daily life.

It is essential that that cultural change puts the citizen at the centre of the process of government and make Ministers and civil servants truly accountable. If we are to restore the citizen's trust in government, the Government must trust their citizens more than at present. The Bill does not place the Government's trust sufficiently in the people whom we represent.

When the Home Secretary appeared before the Public Administration Committee, he bridled somewhat when I suggested that information was the oxygen of democracy—without information it is impossible for democracy to flourish—but that he seemed sometimes to regard it as the carbon monoxide of democracy. I did not mean to insult him or denigrate his commitment to the legislation. I was suggesting that he was over-protective of the citizen, as if the inhalation of the oxygen of information might harm them.

That is a slightly paternalistic approach. It is well intentioned, but wrong. It shows a laudable commitment to open government, but it is not the same as conferring the right to know on the citizen. It is not the same as giving up the Government's monopoly on information and accepting that citizens may come upon information that others would be eager to keep from them.

If freedom of information is to be truly effective, Governments have to be prepared to make mistakes in disclosure. The change of culture to which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary refers is a leap of faith. All leaps of faith involve risks and hazards, but in a truly mature democracy, we should accept those risks freely. That is what happens in a free society based on a mature relationship between the governed and their Government.

Three principal shortcomings in the Bill go to its heart. The first is the absence of a purpose clause, about which others have spoken. The second is the existence of blanket exemptions. The third is the limit on the Information Commissioner's powers. The purpose clause, more than any other, should signal the cultural change that we all seek. It should leave civil servants in no doubt that power has shifted from the panjandrums to the people. The Bill allows civil servants to manage change without being subject to it. That is a weakness in the proposals. The absence of a purpose clause leaves Whitehall in charge, leaves citizens' rights abridged and weakens the rest of a Bill that its presence should inform and illuminate.

A great deal has been said about the exemptions. I concede that some areas of public administration are sensitive and it would not be sensible to divulge information about them. Every speaker has accepted that the right to know is no more absolute than the right to freedom of speech. James Madison, the American president who gave us Madison Square garden, also said:

> "Knowledge will for ever govern ignorance and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

The class exemptions that remain in the Bill disarm the citizen. They close off vast territories of information and knowledge, irrespective of whether disclosure would cause harm. That is the key point. I take little comfort from a commitment that today's Ministers will always err on the side of disclosure. They may well do that, or set out intending to do that.

I apologise to the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), as I did not mean to tweak his tail in my intervention. However, I elicited from him the kind of response that I might have expected—although not because it was he who gave it. He reeled off at least three or four reasons why the information that I was seeking from him should remain concealed. There may be good reasons for that—there may not. I am not in a position to judge.

Mr. David Davis: I am.

Mr. Bradley: Frankly, that is not good enough. I do not make this point ad hominem, because other Ministers in previous Administrations, in the current Administration and in Administrations to come have made, and will make, the same special pleading when faced with disclosures that they would rather not make.

I take little comfort from a commitment that today's Ministers make and that tomorrow's Ministers may not. Legislation that does not foresee the possibility of a change of Government, and does not provide rights that can withstand such change, is flawed legislation. I would argue that the provisions of the Bill should be founded not on good intentions, but on statute.

According to the Consumers Association, 69 per cent. of people polled do not trust Ministers to disclose information when it is sought. This Bill is as much about trust in Government and restoring people's faith and confidence in the way in which they are governed as it is about the freedom of information. That is precisely why Ministers should not be given the last word. It is also why Ministers should not seek to have the last word.

For all information, in my view, the only test should be whether its release would cause harm and whether its disclosure would prejudice the public interest. That judgment itself should be open to contest by the Information Commissioner, whose own decision, after all, is subject to appeal. In that way, both the citizen's right to know and the public authorities' need, on occasion, to withhold information are preserved.

Thus, authorities will not be seen to have an automatic right to conceal their mistakes or wrongdoings. Nor will commercial interests have the opportunity to conceal, for example, the dangerous goods that they are seeking to market for commercial profit.

The central issue is the limitation that the Bill places on the powers of the Information Commissioner. The commissioner is not, and should not be, merely a cipher. She will be the advocate of openness. Sometimes, she will support and acknowledge the need to withhold information, but she must be—and must be seen to be—the citizen's champion. She will be able to exercise that onerous responsibility only if she has powers that are enforceable on the citizen's behalf, and if she has the power to enforce those decisions without fear or favour.

The ombudsman's experience of the code—this is the weakness of the voluntary code—has been that recalcitrant Departments and public bodies have too often exploited the ombudsman's lack of enforcement powers by challenging not just the ombudsman's judgment, but his interpretation of the code. Successive ombudsmen have commented on this matter. I am indebted to the Campaign for Freedom of Information for providing those sources. We should all pay tribute to the campaign for its extraordinary work over a long period. The fact that the Bill has been introduced is much to its credit, its major problems with some of its central planks notwithstanding.

[Mr. Bradley]

In 1995, former Ombudsman William Reid said of the code:

"there is a tendency in some departments to use every argument that can be mounted, whether legally-based, Code-based or at times simply obstructive, to help justify a past decision that a particular document or piece of information should not be released instead of reappraising the matter in the light of the code with an open mind."

Two years later, when the code had been in operation for three years, Mr. Reid's successor Michael Buckley said that departments

"fear that they are setting a precedent . . . they do not want to say yes, that the department accepts this interpretation of the Code. It turns into a process almost of negotiation".

Somewhat more colourfully, he said:

"if the Government wants me to act as referee we cannot have a situation in which every time I award a free kick everyone troops off the field for an elaborate investigation of the rule book and to telephone the FA."

Those well-chosen words illustrate amply why a voluntary code, well intentioned though it may be, is ultimately ineffective.

If the Bill is to bring about the culture change in Whitehall that we seek; if it is to lead to a better understanding of, sympathy for, and commitment to, the way in which we are governed; if Ministers are truly to be held to account; if there is to be transparency in public administration; and if we are to restore public confidence in Government, the citizen must know that the Information Commissioner can, and will, enforce his or her rights.

I commend my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for the concessions that have been made by, for example, reducing the response time from 40 to 20 days, removing rights to restrict the way in which information gained by citizens can be used, removing the jigsaw clause and the protection from self-incrimination, and limiting Ministers' rights to create new class exemptions.

A very few more significant amendments will make a good Bill immeasurably better. It will, if he wants it, provide my right hon. Friend with a lasting testament to a truly radical, reforming Government, prepared to reinvigorate our democracy and to redefine and extend citizens' rights, not only in principle but in practice.

9.23 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): This has been a good debate. Somewhat to my surprise, I found myself deriving some pleasure from the speech of the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley). The main feature was a lot better than the trailer that we had during the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis). Perhaps it is best to draw a veil over that.

I agree strongly with what my right hon. Friend said about the policy side of the Bill and the ill-fated clause 33. I also agree strongly with my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd). He spoke compellingly and has some political and moral capital that he can expend on this cause, as has the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), to whom the whole House listened with great interest and who spoke, as he saw it, for the interests of the man in the street.

There is a mood in the House—among all parties—in favour of greater openness in government. There is also a general feeling that the Bill as it stands falls short of being what the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) characterised as an all-singing, all-dancing Bill. I hope very much that the Government will listen carefully to the excellent points made not only by Conservative Front Benchers but by Government Members too.

I want to identify the Bill's biggest deficiencies. I agree with the comments made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) about the extent of the exemptions, and those exemptions that rely on the prejudice test. I am also dubious about that test. It will leave England in a different position from Scotland, and I am not as relaxed about that as the Home Secretary.

The Bill's biggest deficiency lies in the way in which it treats the workings of central Government. I agree with the House of Lords Select Committee, which said:

"It is fundamental to Freedom of Information law and practice that government information is seen as belonging to the people, who have a right to see and use the information unless there are good reasons for exempting it."

If the Government cannot set a good example on freedom of information, what can we expect from others?

As it stands, the Bill is defective, because clause 33 would impose a wide exemption on matters relating to Government policy. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge–Brownhills made some good points about class exemptions, and clause 33 contains a class exemption par excellence. It does not require a test of prejudice: information can be withheld purely because it falls within the class described in clause 33. That is a wide exemption from the requirement for disclosure.

I am grateful to the Campaign for Freedom of Information for an overview, which I share:

"The exemption is not limited to sensitive civil service advice, or to information whose disclosure would harm the decision-making process or the frankness of internal deliberations. It applies to all information considered during the development of a policy, including purely factual information, analysis of the facts, scientific advice, mundane exchanges between officials, extrapolations from existing trends or simple descriptions of existing practice."

Those would all be outside the freedom of information requirement because they fall within clause 33. Anything that would not be caught by clause 33—although it is hard to envisage what that could be—would be caught by clause 34, which contains a harm test.

A "qualified person" has to decide whether one of the various forms of prejudice described in clause 34 arises. Who is the qualified person? It is none other than a Minister of the Crown. As the hon. Member for Cannock Chase rightly said, the tortuous process has two stages. The Minister's decision can be examined to see whether he got it right. Who examines that decision? Under clause 13, it is the Minister himself, again. I am not sure how a Minister should go about that process. Perhaps he should take his decision under clause 33, go to bed, and see whether he is in a better mood the next day to examine it under clause 13.

The Minister has to decide whether the public interest in disclosure outweighs the public interest in maintaining the exemption in question. However, the key point in clause 13, which covers the whole area of Government advice and many other issues, is that it is a purely

discretionary disclosure. Indeed, that is the title of the clause. Ministers decide. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) wrote a very good book called "Ministers Decide", but when the Home Secretary leaves office he will have to call his book "Ministers Decide Everything". Ministers will be judge and jury in their own cause.

Clause 33 contains a wide exemption. I asked the Home Secretary about that, and why information that was wholly innocent and did not cause any prejudice to anybody would be excluded by that clause. I was not convinced by his answer and, without wishing to be too partisan, I must say that I caught the odd whiff of smoke and glimpse of a reflection when I heard the Home Secretary's reply. The clause must be reconsidered and the feeling on both sides of the House is that we need more objectivity and impartiality.

As it stands, the clause would require Ministers to show impartiality and wisdom of almost saintly proportions. Set against the presentational needs that face all Governments and Ministers, it would expect a lot of them. It would be much more realistic if we were to have a true override—not a discretionary one—with Ministers' decisions being examined by someone else. My right hon. and hon. Friends have made some good suggestions about the role that Parliament could play in that.

As it stands, the Bill does a great deal to protect officials—rightly, in some instances—but it is, I fear, a Bill with which Sir Humphrey would feel far too comfortable, and of which he might even be a little proud. At present, the Home Secretary is in danger of seeing his photograph take pride of place in Sir Humphrey's office.

9.30 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Greater openness in Government is one of those issues that can always be expected to stimulate a lively argument in the House, and today's debate has certainly lived up to that expectation. We have been treated to many fine speeches, but I shall single out those of the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd).

More to the point, the debate has confirmed the Government's difficulty in persuading many of their own side, as well as Conservative Members, of the merits of the Bill as it stands. That should come as no surprise to the Home Secretary—who, I am sorry to say, has not yet arrived—because, for all his bluster, mingled with his customary charm, he cannot seriously have expected seasoned campaigners for greater openness to swallow his argument that a statutory framework would in itself guarantee a culture of openness.

In its current form, the Bill is not a guarantee that more information would be released than is released now. What matters is that the provisions cover as much information as possible, and are enforced by a strong independent body with the ability to compel public authorities to release information. The Bill conspicuously fails to meet that test, as anyone who has listened to the debate will conclude.

We are being asked to approve a Bill that manages to make more information secret than is the case now. Several Members have referred to its failure to provide a proper mechanism for the release of information, data, facts and analysis providing advice for the purpose of ministerial decisions. Too much discretion is left in the hands of Ministers and officials. One after another, my right hon. Friends the Members for Sutton Coldfield and for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the right hon. Member for South Shields and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), the hon. Members for Hillsborough, for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) and for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) expressed dissatisfaction with the Bill in that important regard.

The right hon. Member for South Shields supported the contention of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden that Lord Butler had it right when he said that an arrangement could be made to segregate information from advice, but the Home Secretary, as ever, seems unconvinced. We know that 195 Members, in the last Session, signed an early-day motion tabled as recently as 19 October, referring to the Government's failure in this respect. They also expressed concern about the fact that the Information Commissioner would have inadequate powers to release information on the grounds of public interest. That, too, characterised the debate: speaker after speaker made the point that there must be a degree of compulsion that is sadly lacking in the Bill.

This, we believe, is the litmus test of a commitment to greater openness. The debate has demonstrated that the Government have failed miserably in that regard. Conveniently, it will still be Ministers and officials—the Sir Humphreys to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) referred—who decide whether information should be released. That is not progress.

The Home Secretary's detailed explanation of the Information Commissioner's powers to require release managed to confuse even the right hon. Member for South Shields, who probably knows more about this subject than anyone else. The Home Secretary was uncharacteristically disingenuous—

Miss Widdecombe: Uncharacteristically?

Mr. Greenway: I am being kind to him. He knows full well that many hon. Members are concerned that the commissioner will have no power to have the final word on whether information should be released in the public interest. Nor does the Bill offer real progress on the kind of information that should generally be available. Hon. Member after hon. Member has confirmed that the Bill represents a step back from the code of practice on access to Government information, which we published in 1994 and strengthened in 1997.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central said that the code had virtues. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire said that it was a positive step forward. The hon. Member for Hillsborough was good enough to say that she had welcomed it. In the White Paper, Ministers criticised the code for having too many exemptions. There were 15, but the Bill contains more than 20—12 pages of them—and provides no proper test of harm. Too many exemptions will make it more difficult for people to get hold of information. The Bill therefore represents a significant

[Mr. Greenway]

shift of attitude from what Ministers said both in opposition and in a White Paper that promised a king's banquet rather than a Bill that delivers a dog's breakfast—and a complex one at that.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The hon. Gentleman has to do better than that.

Mr. Greenway: The right hon. Gentleman has not been listening to the debate. Speaker after speaker has expressed disquiet about the Bill. The hon. Member for Hillsborough called it a lost opportunity. We have heard time and again that it does not go far enough. We are prepared to give the Bill a Second Reading and to take it on trust—"hope" was the word used by the right hon. Member for South Shields—that we will be able to amend the Bill in Committee. However, what the Home Secretary has said is only marginally encouraging. We heard his usual noises about listening to arguments, but the Bill falls significantly short in many key areas.

The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross hoped that the Home Secretary would be susceptible to change, but talked about the Government's being in full flight from the proposals of the White Paper. He said that the Bill was timid, and that the power of Ministers to decide the public interest was perverse. He supported the right hon. Member for South Shields and the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) on the need for a purpose clause, which the code covers.

How bad would the Bill have to be before the Home Secretary and his colleagues would support a reasoned amendment that seeks to censure the Government's approach, asks the Government to reconsider and recognises that the Bill makes more information secret than our code did? Although they agree with our unresolved criticisms of the Bill, many hon. Members have criticised our reasoned amendment.

Mr. White: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: I do not have time.

What is wrong with asking the House to ask the Government to reconsider the Bill and produce a better one? The Bill is less effective than the code, and we are being asked to take a great deal on trust.

The Home Secretary referred to the two devices used in Australia to delay publication of information. His own device is remarkably transparent: publish a Bill, knowing that he has to give ground on some issues, allow lots of consultation with a Select Committee and pre-legislative scrutiny, then publish a revised Bill, which his hon. Friends can say today is much improved. Throughout the debate, however, one speaker after another has expressed continuing fundamental concerns about the Bill.

That is why the House is entitled to ask the Government why they are in retreat from their White Paper proposals. Why have they changed their mind? Have they lost their nerve, or has the experience of power blunted their enthusiasm for greater transparency? Or is it, as the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) said, because civil servants have managed to introduce change without giving up control? That says it all.

Perhaps the right hon. Member for South Shields, for whom I have the highest regard as he well knows, will follow the example of some of his right hon. Friends and publish his memoirs at an early date, so that we can be enlightened further as to why the Government have had such a remarkable change of heart.

While we have serious criticisms of the Government's revised approach, which are reflected in our amendment, we want to stress our commitment to strengthening the provisions in the Bill if the House gives it a Second Reading—*[Interruption.]* The Home Secretary should calm himself and wait and see. Had he listened to the entire debate, as I have, he could not feel comfortable as a senior Minister in a Government when one after another of his Beck Benchers has criticised the key elements of the Bill. Had they more courage, they would be joining us in the Lobby.

Our approach to the Bill will reflect the positive attitude displayed in our code of practice, so that the emphasis is clearly one of a presumption in favour of release of information, rather than in secrecy. The hon. Member for Warrington, North spoke in support of a statutory right to disclosure. That is not what is in the Bill. We will try to remove several of the class exemptions, some of which do not sit easily with a supposed culture of openness. We will also work to ensure that the provisions of the legislation are enforced by a body that can force public authorities—that has been the demand in the debate—and Governments to release information in the public interest.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) explained in her opening remarks, our preference would have been for an information ombudsman and a role for Parliament—for this House—in overseeing the release of information. The hon. Member for Hillsborough said that, in reality, it will be a David and Goliath situation and that we ought to trust the independent arbiter. We agree and, to ensure that the Bill is strengthened in that regard, we shall seek support from Labour Members in Committee and on Report—which will be an interesting event judging by what we have heard tonight. It cannot be right that Ministers and officials have the final say on whether information is released.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central and my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills asked that the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House. I have much sympathy with their argument. Having heard so much opposition to the Government's measures from their Back Benchers, we would relish such a Committee.

The Home Secretary claims that the Bill represents a sea change in providing access to information, and that the culture of secrecy is over. He asserts that introducing a statutory right heralds a new era of openness. The debate has shown that many of his hon. Friends, as well as Conservative Members, are not fully convinced of that. They have demonstrated serious reservations about key aspects of the Government's proposals. The general mood of the debate demands that the Home Secretary should think again. Right hon. and hon. Members can reinforce that concern by supporting our reasoned amendment.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) has some brass

neck. In 18 years, the Tories failed to create any statutory right to know. Their code of practice was non-statutory and effectively unenforceable. The hon. Member for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) said from the Conservative Benches that the Conservative Government set their face against freedom of information legislation. Now they have the unmitigated gall to criticise a Government who are creating a statutory right to know. The Tory party is without credibility on freedom of information. Tory Members' pious posturing is a case of, "Do as I say and not as I did for the past 18 years".

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) described the speech of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) as a sad and confused affair. I chide him. He was too harsh. Let me defend the right hon. Lady. She has a difficult brief. Having done nothing to end the culture of secrecy in Whitehall for 18 years, she now opposes a Government who are acting to tackle it. It is difficult for her. At one point, she favoured keeping things as they were—the old inadequate code. Then she wanted to amend the Bill to strengthen and support it. Then she wanted to deny the Bill a Second Reading and prevent any amendments being tabled.

The right hon. Lady told us that she had done her homework and that there was some logic to the various U-turns. By the end of her speech, I thought that they had become S-bends. I am sure that there was logic somewhere, but she could not explain it to us, just as she could not explain why she kept secret a pile of prison reports on her desk for a year. At least when criticisms come from the Liberal Democrats or from our own Back Benchers, they have the merit of coming from those who have a record of supporting a statutory right to know. We have the opportunity in the weeks to come in Committee to deal in depth with criticisms of the Bill, but I will deal with some of the main ones today, including the main Conservative ones.

Disagreements about a Bill containing such detail are inevitable, but let us set out the common ground between the Government and many of my colleagues on the Back Benches who expressed concerns and made excellent contributions to the debate. It was a very good debate. The speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) received warm and deserved tributes from many hon. Members. It was an important contribution to the debate. Excellent speeches were also made by my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent, Central, for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) and for Warrington, North (Helen Jones). A thoughtful speech was made by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis).

The level of agreement is profound. We all agree that the Whitehall that we inherited is too secretive. It is unnecessarily secretive. It is secretive by culture, and unnecessary secrecy can be profoundly undemocratic and corrosive, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North said.

As the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) said, there is a mood for greater openness in the House. The Government and Whitehall recognise that there is a need to be more open, but I say to our critics that the advocates of freedom of information do not have a monopoly on righteousness. There is a tension between the right to know and other values. If we were debating a right to privacy today, many of those who advocate freedom of information might also advocate a right to privacy for Britain.

The Government hold information about individuals. They usually have no consent to make that public. Journalists may well want access to information held by Government, but it is not always right to hand it over. What may be suitable for *The Guardian* is not necessarily right for Britain.

Companies give substantial amounts of information to Government about commercially confidential matters—such as their financial intentions, their approach to their competitors and the internal affairs of their business. Interestingly, under United States freedom of information legislation, companies made up to 60 per cent. of the requests for information because they were trying to find out about the commercial secrets held by their competitors. If British-based companies believed that, under freedom of information legislation, our Government would unnecessarily hand over commercially confidential information to the press or competitors, it would restrict our ability to obtain otherwise sensitive information about financial movements, the environment and health and safety issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North suggested that an explicit public interest in disclosure should be referred to in the exemption for information. I point out to her that clause 13 contains a requirement to consider the public interest in disclosure.

People also expect Government to be run according to the principle of collective responsibility. Parties are the basis of democratic government. By their nature, parties are coalitions and there must be room for legitimate discussion within any Government. There must also be room for senior officials to advise Ministers without their advice appearing on the front page of national newspapers a little later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) rightly referred to the need for a legitimate area for policy formation—limited, yes, but necessary. Government is still too secret, but the public interest is also served by some recognition of a right to privacy, some rights to commercial confidentiality and the right to develop an efficient policy advice system within Government—as well as the right to know.

None of those values is absolute. There can be no absolute right to privacy, confidentiality or internal Government debate, any more than there is an absolute right to information in all circumstances. Those are rights for the balancing. There is a natural and creative tension. It is perfectly legitimate and proper for each country to determine how, within its culture and history, it gives different weight in its laws to each of those values. Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and other countries have struck the balance in their own way. They may all be useful examples, but they should not be regarded as templates forcing us down a particular route. We must seek our own solution in robust debate in this House and in this country.

Some people have a tendency to point to all the most liberal propositions in the legislation in other countries. They then add up all those points and say that a failure to meet the test of being the most liberal on all counts is a betrayal. That is not what we promised in our manifesto.

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

The Bill delivers a sensible and balanced package, reflecting the importance that we attach to freedom of information, as well as to privacy of the individual, while not permitting the abuse of our legislation for commercial advantage; it will enable effective democratic government.

We welcome the chance to debate those issues with colleagues. We have shown that we are willing to listen and we shall continue to do so. The recognition of the need for balance is essential. I welcome that recognition, especially in the contributions made by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields and my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase. I point out to my colleagues that, although various newspapers—including *The Guardian*—have orchestrated a principled campaign on this matter, what is right for journalists is not necessarily right for us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hillsborough asked whether Ministers were entrenched. I assure her that we are not. We are convinced that we have found the right balance. We do not have a monopoly on wisdom in these matters, but we are prepared to engage in vigorous debate and we are not afraid to listen.

Freedom of information is a three-stage process. First, hon. Members should remember that, in the Data Protection Act 1998, the Government have already granted the right to access to personal files held by public authorities. Many other countries regard that as the core of what they call freedom of information. In a sense, we already have in place provisions that enable members of the public to look at their files.

In the Bill, we are in the process of implementing the second stage—access to wider Government information. The third stage has also begun, with the publication of yesterday's strategy to begin opening up the culture of Whitehall and other public authorities.

Some countries have tough FOI laws but have had limited changes in the culture of the bureaucracy, so FOI has had limited success in creating openness. Other countries, such as New Zealand, have concentrated less on the wording of the legislation than on the cultural changes and have achieved a greater degree of openness. Legislation is only part of the process. It provides the essential legal base, but creating a new culture of openness is in many ways the real test.

Yesterday, the Home Office published the report of a working party on openness in the public sector, which demanded that public authorities now start the process of putting in place that culture of greater openness. To some extent, as has been said, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has already published a large amount of information previously held secret. We are in the process now of creating a new culture in Whitehall and among public authorities. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald says that it was done under her code of practice. It was not under her code of practice; it was a decision by Ministers that they wanted to be more open, unlike the previous Government. The present Government were prepared to publish these things.

A classic example, which the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald should remember, is the seven piles of documents on the guidance given to immigration officers, which she wanted to keep secret and which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I decided to put into the public arena. That information has done no damage to immigration controls. That was an example not of the right hon. Lady's code of practice, but of moving forward on freedom of information voluntarily.

However, we need to do more than give Ministers the right to move forward voluntarily. We need a new culture in Whitehall and among all public authorities. Some have asked, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields, what if the Government should change? What if there should be some other Government who were not as open as the present Government are? That is why the cultural change is necessary. We intend to push forward this agenda, building stage upon stage to create a new openness in Government, which will remain for decades to come. That is what the Government are committed to, and that is what we intend to deliver.

The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) voiced several criticisms about the number of clauses dealing with exemptions. He claimed that there were 24 exemptions in the Bill. There are in fact 25 clauses dealing with exemptions, but most of the subject areas remain largely the same as they were in the White Paper "Your Right to Know"—national security, defence, international relations, law enforcement and others with which the right hon. Gentleman is familiar. However, we have added Parliament and other bodies, such as the National Audit Office, to the exempted area. We must protect parliamentary privilege, so we have had to add some exemptions for them. Because we have broadened the Bill, we have had to add some narrow exemptions.

The Bill will deliver a statutory right to know in Britain for the first time ever. There will be more information about health authorities delivering services, about the police dealing with burglaries and thefts, about schools, about local councils and about every area of government, including local government, and how our public authorities work.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) said that the Bill marks a fundamental shift of power from the state to the people. Indeed it does. The Conservatives talked about FOI; we shall deliver it. All that they came up with was a non-statutory code. I confess that I did not even know about it, and I suspect that most people did not. The Conservatives' FOI code was kept secret; we need to ensure that we are now public. The Bill will deliver openness and deserves support. I commend it to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 138, Noes 377.

Division No. 12] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Brazier, Julian
Amess, David	Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James	Burns, Simon
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Butterfill, John
Beggs, Roy	Cash, William
Bercow, John	Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Blunt, Crispin	
Body, Sir Richard	Clappison, James
Boswell, Tim	Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*	
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia	Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Brady, Graham	Collins, Tim

Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and Mrs. Jacqui Lait.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan

Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Greg Pope.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills),

That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House.—*[Mr. Greenway.]*

The House divided: Ayes 178, Noes 327.

Division No. 13] **[10.15 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret

Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and Mrs. Jacqui Lait.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally

Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Greg Pope.

Question accordingly negatived.

Bill committed to a Standing Committee.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Freedom of Information Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any increase attributable to the Act in the expenses of the Secretary of State in respect of the Data Protection Commissioner (renamed the Information Commissioner by the Act), the Data Protection Tribunal (renamed the Information Tribunal by the Act) or the members of that Tribunal,

(b) any administrative expenses of the Secretary of State attributable to the Act,

(c) any other expenses incurred in consequence of the Act by a Minister of the Crown or government department or by the House of Commons or the House of Lords, and

(d) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums which under any other Act are payable out of money so provided.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Constitutional Law

That the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Transfer of Functions to the Scottish Ministers etc.) (No. 2) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 24th November, be approved.

Environmental Protection

That the draft Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 1999, which were laid before this House on 25th November, be approved.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

Question agreed to.

SECTION 5 OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (AMENDMENT) ACT 1993

Ordered,

That, for the purposes of their approval under section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993, the Financial Statement and Budget Report 1999–2000, the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1999–2000 and the Pre-Budget Report 1999 shall be treated as if they were instruments subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

Tenant Farming

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Will hon. Members leaving the Chamber please do so quickly and quietly? We must begin the Adjournment debate.

10.28 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): It is fortuitous that this Adjournment debate should follow the statement on rural development regulation made earlier today by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

As my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary will know, this is the second debate—in as many years—that I have initiated on the subject of tenant farming. In November 1997, I focused predominantly on county council smallholdings. I want to broaden the debate today to discuss the plight of tenant farmers more generally, but I shall make some remarks about the county council smallholding sector, as we have not made as much progress as we might have done.

In my previous debate, I noted the grave circumstances of many county council tenants, with falling incomes and a declining asset base. It gives me no pleasure to say that today we face an even more difficult situation. The recent Deloitte and Touche report shows an industry in sharp decline, with almost all sectors in crisis. It is easy to focus on all the problems. I do not want to exaggerate them, but it is important to understand the problems of the tenanted sector. My hon. Friend the Minister will sympathise and will do what he can to get redress for those concerned.

I have drawn heavily on the experiences of my friend John Warfield of Welches farm, Standish—a dairy farmer on part of the Gloucestershire county council farm estate. John has regularly shared with me the problems of being a tenant farmer and told me how difficult it is to break out of the cycle of despondency and despair that affects farmers in general and tenants in particular. I have also drawn on the views of George Dunn, the chief executive of the Tenant Farmers Association, and Ken Oliver, the chairman of the National Farmers Union tenants committee, who are doubtless well known to my hon. Friend the Minister.

Although the tenant farming sector has been declining in importance until recently, it still represents about 30 per cent. of the productive land area. It relies on its stock and working capital for its assets base as the value of the land, including the house, and the fixed capital normally rest with the landlord. I do not have to remind my hon. Friend that the value of livestock and other working capital has greatly plummeted in the past couple of years in particular, whereas land and buildings have tended to maintain their value. Compared with their owner-occupier neighbours, tenants are more exposed to the current problems. It is also a worrying trend that many tenants are cashing in their investments early to see them through these difficult times. For many, the decision is between security for today and security for the future. I worry tremendously for them when they come to the end of their tenancy agreements.

Although the major clearing banks have been supportive of agriculture through these difficult times, they are looking carefully at the risk to which they are

[Mr. David Drew]

exposed in lending to tenanted holdings or servicing existing debt. Once again, tenant farmers are at the forefront of the problems, because they have no capital other than that which they have invested in the farm buildings and stock. I spoke to the manager at one of the major clearing banks in my area. He explained how closely they were monitoring the situation. At least there is an understanding of the nature of the problems. I welcome the fact that bank managers have an opportunity that they did not have previously to use their local knowledge and understanding.

One way out of a difficult situation is to take on extra land. That should be possible through the operation of farm business tenancies, which allow tenants to spread fixed costs and make smaller units more viable. Tenants face major disadvantages, because they are unable to tender the rent levels that owner-occupiers pay for extra land offered by landlords. Although farm business tenancy rents are beginning to fall, they are still unrealistically high. That is due mainly to the fact that the number of farmers seeking to take on extra land exceeds the land available and the landlords willing to let it.

It is clear that new entrants have difficulty in getting started. One disappointing aspect of today's announcement is the lack of a retirement package. That does not help the situation. I understand what my right hon. Friend said and I am sure that he is interested in working on that, but we are talking about a difficult industry and many issues need to be dealt with to get it right.

On land prices, I have advanced the view before in this place that it is highly unlikely that agriculture land values will fall by much, if at all. This is because, in our small island, such values will be affected by their opportunity cost and what alternative uses land might be put to. Given that the main alternative use is development, it is therefore highly unlikely that the land price will fall unless we drastically toughen the planning system. Nevertheless, that brings opportunities, because it means that the land is available. What better use could be made of that land than to offer it to tenanted farmers? I would always advocate that point of view, and hopefully I would get support in so doing.

So far, I have painted a gloomy picture, and I cannot pretend otherwise. However, it is important to look at the opportunities—as well as the many threats—and the way in which the Government can help to develop these opportunities. We have had an important announcement today, and I think that everyone present would welcome the nature of it and the completely different direction in which we are now moving.

I want to make two pleas in welcoming today's proposals. I have touched on one, which is that we still need to make every effort to come up with a retirement package—not just for existing farmers, many of whom want to leave the land, but to allow new people to come on to the land. Apparently, it is difficult to achieve that at this time through rural development regulations, and my right hon. Friend the Minister was honest and open about the fact that he cannot pretend that he can achieve that within a foreseeable period. I have grown used to him pulling rabbits out of the hat, and would hope that some further prestidigitation is possible.

The Government rightly talk about the need for restructuring, and the rural development package will allow us to achieve that. However, there is another factor on which I wish to dwell—whether it is the Government's intention to modulate farm support to fund the different elements of the rural development regulation package.

The Minister will be aware that it is much more difficult for farm tenants to engage in some of these schemes because of the lack of economies of scale, and so on. I presume that the Minister will have some comments to make about the way in which we can help tenants—particularly in areas such as the movement to organic farming, or how they can make better use of countryside stewardships. It is not just up to the Government—it is also up to individual landlords to make those changes feasible.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will realise that concern has been expressed about some of the other changes that are taking place, particularly with regard to the integrated administration and control system renegotiations, which are coming in at short notice, and the change in subsidies for beef cattle. Concern has been expressed to me by tenants about the way in which we are apparently moving over to six counting days, as that will be difficult to manage. We have to be aware that that may do the opposite of what we want it to do—it may lead to even more intensification and short-termism.

I want to deal with the subject of less-favoured areas. Concern has been expressed by the tenanted sector over the switch from headage-based support to area-based support in hill areas. I know that the Tenant Farmers Association in particular is not pleased with the scheme, but sees it as inevitable and something that it will learn to live with. The main concern is that tenants will lose more of their capital base. As I understand it, the TFA scheme—proposed as a compromise following consultation—provides that producers should be able to take a capital payment at the beginning of the five-year period of the scheme, allowing them to look at possible avenues for restructuring or other activities to make their income base more viable for the future. I would welcome the Minister's views on those proposals.

Farm business tenancies have clearly offered more land for letting than was coming forward under the previous legislation on agricultural holdings. However, as I have indicated, there are problems which need to be addressed, and I understand that the Government are committed to a review of the operation of farm business tenancies in the autumn of next year—the fifth anniversary of the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995. I hope that the review will include the imbalance in negotiating power between landlords and tenants, the unviably high rents, the restrictive clauses included by landlords in FBTs, which were meant to provide greater flexibility to tenants than the old legislation, and the relatively short average length of letting under FBTs.

There is a further major problem with the FBT legislation, which was intended to ensure that, under the 1986 Act, tenants would not be affected by the change in the law. I have become aware of situations in which tenants on 1986 Act tenancies may lose that status because of small changes or good estate management. I am informed that section 4 of the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995 covers those situations in which a new tenancy falls to be regulated not by the 1995 Act, but by earlier legislation, including the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986.

When there is a change to a 1986 Act tenancy because new land is added, a joint tenancy is created, so the landlord is keen to provide the tenant with a bigger holding; but I gather that, under a case B notice to quit and other circumstances, the tenant can be disadvantaged. The loopholes must be closed in an amendment to section 4 of the 1995 Act.

Gloucestershire is very dependent on the dairy sector. Tenants are worried about the threat of the loss of milk quotas, which the official Opposition welcome, as I am sure the Government will in theory. The problem is that, in the short term, tenants will lose a source of collateral for the banks, and because, although land price rises compensate owner-occupiers, no such benefit accrues to them.

My hon. Friend the Minister will be aware that county council smallholdings are an important part of our farming economy, covering more than 300,000 acres.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I agree with almost every word that the hon. Gentleman has said. Does he agree that the problem that has bedevilled the counties that are trying to maintain the smallholdings estate is the apparent mismatch between the policies of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—the DOE as was—and those of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and that we need a clear policy direction for local authorities on whether the county estate is to play a significant part in providing tenanted farming?

Mr. Drew: I do not disagree at all. The first thing that local authorities should do is make a clear statement that they want to hang on to that estate and manage it accordingly on a long-term asset basis, rather than viewing it as a quick return. I have always been worried about the 6 per cent. return, which is totally crazy for land.

There has been a good return on county council smallholdings. In March 1997, the last year for which we have figures, there was an £8.4 million surplus—almost doubling the previous year's surplus. It will not be so good now. We must build on the opportunities that that provides.

There are difficulties with the law on smallholdings. Section 36 of the Agriculture Act 1970 gives a statutory duty to provide farms to those who want to be farmers in their own right, but there has always been some worry among farmers and representatives about how genuine that statute will prove when it is fully tested. There has always been a view that central Government may have a role to play in making it clear to local government that they are fully committed to that, even though they do not have a direct influence in the matter.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister conduct a strategic review of the national importance of these assets so that we can get a genuine understanding of their importance not only to agriculture, but to the whole rural economy?

I shall make two positive points to set beside the rather gloomy picture so far. People still want to become tenant farmers, and that is certainly true of the county council farm estate. We should do everything that we can to make that possible, which is why I have already mentioned the need for some sort of retirement scheme. Co-operation between tenants can also provide opportunities. They can compete more effectively by joining together. I know that the idea of co-operation does not always have a true resonance among farmers, even though many of them are members of one or other form of co-operative. If we could encourage co-operative activity, the farmers would be the biggest gainers.

I have listened with interest in the past few months to the views of Ben Gill, the president of the NFU, who has advocated co-operation. In Gloucestershire, Charles Coats, the manager of the county farm estate, Martin Wright of the NFU and George Dunn of the TFA are shortly to meet to consider ways in which they can increase co-operation. They realise that there is no better way for farmers to improve their marketing skills than to be able to service the county council by providing produce for schools, homes and the work force in general.

We have a successful farmers market in Stroud, led by Clare Gerbrands. That provides many opportunities, but farmers need the wherewithal to develop them. I have also been impressed by the ideas of the Plunkett Foundation, which is able to advise farmers on the best ways to help each other. I look forward to my hon. Friend's response, because it is important to draw the plight of tenant farmers to the attention of the House and those outside. We must see tenant farmers as part of the rural fabric and anything any of us can do to help that is important.

10.47 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on obtaining this debate. No other hon. Member has taken such a close and detailed interest in the tenanted sector of the farming industry. He has raised several important points and I shall try to deal with them.

I assure my hon. Friend that the work undertaken by the Tenant Farmers Association in pursuing its members' interests is respected both by my ministerial colleagues and officials. We meet TFA representatives regularly and they are important consultees. We listen to their views carefully and they influence our policies.

The tenanted sector is important for the farming industry. Some 34 per cent. of farm land in England is tenanted in one form or another, but the sector is part of a broader picture—that of the agriculture industry as a whole. Although most of my remarks tonight will address particular issues for tenants, others will deal with matters of wider application to farmers generally, as my hon. Friend will be well aware.

I wish to make it clear that the Government recognise the real difficulties being faced by the agricultural sector and the wider rural economy. The dramatic fall in farm incomes over recent years has affected the whole industry. For that reason, the Government have introduced a variety of measures, including more support for hill farmers in the shape of an additional £60 million in hill livestock compensatory allowances for 1999 and 2000, and the securing of additional EU funds as compensation to farmers for the strength of the pound relative to the euro, with £227 million already paid and £293 million to come.

It is recognised that the measures taken as necessary safeguards in the wake of the BSE crisis entail potential costs for the industry. For that reason, the Government

[Mr. Elliot Morley]

are paying for cattle passports at a cost of £22 million per annum, and for specified risk material inspections at a further cost of £18 million per annum. Those measures will be of direct benefit to the livestock sector, especially in the hills and the less-favoured areas—the LFAs.

As my hon. Friend said, my right hon. Friend announced today a radical redirection of support for agriculture and a significant increase in expenditure on rural development measures, under the rural development regulations. I am very pleased about that. The second pillar of the common agricultural policy—as the rural development regulations have become known—is of the greatest importance to the future well being of rural areas in general. I assure my hon. Friend that input from farming organisations, including the Tenant Farmers Association, has been invaluable in refining the package.

We have listened carefully to the views of all parts of the farming industry, and other rural interests, in weighing the various options and determining how best to use the available funding. The rural development regulations mark an important new step towards supporting people rather than products, and a further move towards compensating farmers not only for their production but for their additional contribution to society, particularly as guardians of the rural landscape, to biodiversity and nature conservation. I think that that is the right way in which to reform the common agricultural policy—a reform that must come.

My hon. Friend raised a number of points. I understood his point about retirement. Like me, he will have heard the Minister make clear his support for the idea of applying the rural development regulations to retirement schemes. However, when the options were considered, making the scheme work proved enormously difficult. There was the issue of value for money and the problem of achieving the desired end; there was also the question of who would qualify, and the potential divisiveness of such a scheme in the farming sector. Given all those difficulties, it was hard to produce a workable scheme meeting the requirements that we would want, and bodies such as the Tenant Farmers Association would want. Given that people must think ahead, my right hon. Friend the Minister is right to say that it is not possible to include a retirement option. That is the fairest and most honest thing that can be said.

I understand my hon. Friend's point about potential restrictions in relation to tenancy agreements in both the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995 and the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986. I have encountered the issue when I have spoken to representatives of the Tenants Farmers Association, particularly through the ministerial consultation panels that we have set up on a regional basis. I meet those panels regularly, and it seems to me that there are potential problems.

Issues relating to farm business tenancies must be negotiated between landlord and tenant. I am aware of concern that some of the tenancies are shorter than the five-year minimum that would apply to agri-environmental schemes. That makes sense to neither the tenant nor the landowner. We have discussed the matter with landowners' representatives such as the Country Landowners Association, and they agree entirely. They think that it is in the landowners' interests to work with tenants, and to give them maximum flexibility in relation to what they can do within their tenancy agreements.

I genuinely believe that the CLA advocates that. When we last discussed the matter, we discussed the possibility of a joint approach to emphasise the desirability of securing flexibility within the terms of the 1995 Act. I am aware that there is some concern about the workings of the 1986 Act, and about the possibility of disadvantage to tenants who want the possibility of more diversity on their holdings. I am prepared to consider the matter, but, as I think that it should be considered in detail, I shall—following my hon. Friend's representations—discuss it with officials and write to my hon. Friend in detail telling him whether action needs to be taken and what action would be appropriate.

We recognise the particular needs of hill farmers. There has been a separate consultation exercise on successors to the hill livestock compensatory allowance. I know that the Tenant Farmers Association has concerns about that, but we must move towards an "area" basis for support under the HLCA successor schemes. We in the Ministry have presented a compromise to the various interest groups, bearing in mind the need for viable business, the concerns of environmental groups about upland management, and the question of how to make a workable scheme. Representations that we receive will be taken into account.

One of the great strengths of the package announced today by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is that a significant sum of money will go into article 33 measures on rural diversification. That can support measures of the type that my hon. Friend has mentioned, including co-operation, marketing and producer groups. I am glad that that opportunity is being significantly financed, and hope that progress can be made.

My hon. Friend referred to the role that county council smallholdings can play in making suitable opportunities available to new entrants. We recognise the importance of that role, and I congratulate those authorities that have adopted positive policies for the continuance of their estates.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) mentioned a potential conflict in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I may be wrong, but I believe that he was referring to policies introduced a few years ago that encouraged local authorities to dispose of their estates because they could keep more capital. That system has ended and the damaging inducement has been taken away.

I take the hon. Gentleman's point that we need opportunities for tenants to move on from their farms, and we should encourage county farm authorities to be more forward looking, offering progressive estate structures that make way at the bottom of the ladder for newcomers. I should be only too pleased to consider that idea, and to look into opportunities for farm diversification that can make businesses more viable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud raised many important points. He rightly said that a review is due on the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995, which will provide

an opportunity to reconsider those points and to hear what the tenants associations have to say. We shall see then whether we can meet tenants' requirements.

The farms business tenancy provides the flexibility that tenants need, but recognition is also required of changing trends in agriculture. Tenant farmers need to be able to diversify, and they should not be prevented from becoming involved in a range of businesses important to their viability. We shall address that issue, and I shall write further to my hon. Friend on some of the points that he has made.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 8 December 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

MESSAGE FROM THE QUEEN

QUEEN'S SPEECH (ANSWER TO ADDRESS)

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported Her Majesty's Answer to the Address, as follows:

I have received with great satisfaction the loyal and dutiful expression of your thanks for the Speech with which I opened the present Session of Parliament.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

World Trade Organisation

1. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): If she will make a statement on the outcome of the World Trade Organisation Seattle meeting on trade with reference to prospects for better trade access for the world's poorest countries. [100348]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): As I think everyone noticed, the ministerial conference in Seattle failed to reach agreement on the agenda for the next round of trade negotiations. That is disappointing, but of course it is not the end of the story. Given that three quarters of the members of the World Trade Organisation are from developing countries, we are hopeful that big gains can be made. Under the Uruguay round, it was agreed that new talks would take place on trade in agriculture and services; other agreements are up for review. We will be working with others in Geneva to try to secure agreement on a new round that will bring real benefits to developing countries.

Mr. Cunningham: Will my right hon. Friend ensure that third-world debt and tariff reductions in the developed countries will be high on the agenda? That would facilitate trading arrangements so as to help the third world. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend: given the adverse conditions in Seattle, she did a tremendous job on our behalf.

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is surprising that there was so much enthusiasm for reducing third-world debt, which we all fully share, but not for trading opportunities to allow developing countries to make use of that reduction to build up their economies. That is surely the other side of the equation. We agree strongly that various specific improvements are needed, but a reduction in industrial tariffs could be most important and would bring major benefits to developing countries.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Does the right hon. Lady agree that developing countries have a problem with their capacity to negotiate trade deals with the World Trade Organisation? I understand that 30 members of the WTO from the developing countries were not able to send delegates at all, and many others sent only tiny delegations. Does the right hon. Lady agree that it was little wonder that the developing country delegations felt angry and humiliated, with the result that the Latin American, Caribbean and African delegations issued statements on the negotiation process itself? Will she ensure that the Government and the European Union build up the capacity of developing countries before the next trade round, so that those countries can ensure that their voices are heard?

Clare Short: The hon. Lady is right. During the past two years, we have worked hard to put resources and expertise into training negotiators, analysts and the business people who have to implement the rules and take the benefits of trading opportunities. We have persuaded the EU to put more effort into that initiative, which was announced at Seattle and will continue.

The reason for the failure was not only that lack of capacity in developing countries. Ironically, we have never had such a representative body trying to negotiate trade agreements. In the past, the GATT—the general agreement on tariffs and trade—was dominated by the rich blocs. Suddenly, the developing countries are at the table and the procedures of the WTO were not attuned to the inclusion of such a large number of countries—so everyone needs to improve. However, the hon. Lady is right: we have been working on capacity building, but we need more of it.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Was the Secretary of State able to hold discussions with members of the Indian delegation on the proposals that they were trying to float, on the need for developing countries legitimately to protect parts of their domestic agriculture to the point of food security? They want us to draw new distinctions allowing for the use of agricultural subsidies to promote food security rather than product dumping, and they want to be allowed to protect themselves against the theft of their biodiversity on which food security will depend.

Clare Short: I did not talk to the Indian delegation in Seattle, but I have held various discussions on trade with representatives of the Indian Government. By and large, India takes a protectionist position. The greatest food security is not internal to a country; it is the capacity to purchase enough food from wherever it is needed, and the capacity of all the individuals in the country to purchase the food that they need. Considering food security as an internal issue is not the best way of approaching the subject.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for referring to biodiversity, because myths abound on that matter. New inventions are the only intellectual property that can be registered. Under the WTO, there is no threat at all to any traditional knowledge or biodiversity in a country. I am glad to say that that is a myth.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Does the Secretary of State agree with the historian Macaulay that free trade is by far the best thing ever to help the prosperity of mankind, but that it is most difficult to persuade the self-appointed spokesmen of mankind of its merits? In the light of all the criticisms and the organised coalition of attacks on the WTO, will the Government speak out vigorously in favour of free trade and against those who try to use pseudo-humanitarian arguments for protectionism?

Clare Short: I have been doing my very best to speak out for the benefits of free trade in promoting the economic growth that the poorest countries need to reduce poverty. The fastest reduction in poverty in human history was part of the east Asian advance when those countries attracted inward investment, created exporting opportunities and then invested in education. Other poor countries need the same opportunity. Those who benefit from all the technology that multinational capital brings are somehow calling for the poorest in the world not to have access to that technology; they are mistaken in that call. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman completely.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): Does my right hon. Friend think that, despite the failures at Seattle, there is still a chance that all the rich countries will make a binding commitment to tariff and quota-free access on the exports of the 48 poorest countries? If not, does she think that the European Union could unilaterally pursue such a course?

Clare Short: Yes; that was one of the EU's big pushes in the negotiations, and the EU is committed to zero tariff access for "essentially all products" from the least-developed countries. We will go ahead and implement that and we will try to get others to agree to do so too. The United Kingdom believes that such access should apply to all products and not just "essentially all". The least-developed countries have the poorest economies on earth and they make up 0.25 per cent. of world trade. Surely, we can all agree to give them the chance of more trade, and zero tariff access might draw in investment. The EU will go ahead and implement that agreement.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): May I congratulate the Secretary of State, because, in her speech in Seattle, she spoke up for free trade? Does she agree that the collapse of the Seattle talks is a huge setback for the cause of free trade? Does she also agree that the apparent winners were the extremists and anarchists who believe that they wrecked the WTO talks, and that the clear losers were the world's poorest who have so much to gain from steady progress towards global free trade? Is not the credibility of the WTO now in need of urgent restoration? What are her proposals for doing that?

Clare Short: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the consequences of that strange alliance of forces thinking that it had been successful. To damage the WTO is to damage the interests of the poorest nations on earth. The irony is that the WTO is only five years old and that, for the first time, developing countries make up the majority of its members and have a chance to make real gains out of trade negotiations. It is ironic that the negotiations were wrecked.

We need to take the talks forward, but the WTO needs to consider its procedures. The expansion in numbers means that it does not have procedures that are transparent enough for Governments to be clear with their own civil societies about the negotiations. We need to give attention to that, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has said that Britain will make that a priority.

Mr. Streeter: This is an important point. Can the right hon. Lady give a little more detail about the reform of the decision-making procedures of the WTO, because there are probably only three options? Does she agree that, whatever decision is finally arrived at, it is vital that developing countries have a fair say and a louder voice in the decisions made by the WTO? The humiliation that they suffered in Seattle by being locked out of the greenroom, as it came to be called, while the EU and the United States negotiated has set back their confidence in our commitment to free trade. We need to reform the procedures to resolve that problem.

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman slightly overstates the position on the views of developing countries. They were not at the table before. One of the things that may have happened in Seattle is that the United States may have grown up to the fact that the world is globalising and that we need different international instruments to manage it, and certainly all countries and blocs woke up to the fact that developing countries are now at the table. That was a creative outcome of the failure in Seattle.

I agree very much with the hon. Gentleman that there need to be procedures that much more systematically include developing countries in the negotiations. I cannot announce today the new procedures in the WTO; they must be negotiated and agreed by all the membership. However, we agree that it is an absolute priority to get more transparency and more efficient procedures.

Mr. Streeter: Finally, as this is such a huge and important issue, is the right hon. Lady aware that, if she pushes our EU partners to drop unilaterally the EU's tariffs and quotas for all goods and exports from the 48 poorest countries in the world, she will receive the wholehearted support of Conservative Members? We should unilaterally drop our tariffs, set an example and move to global free trade by 2020.

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I pleased that there is agreement on both sides of the House on the need for zero-tariff access for the least developed countries. We need to get other countries to support that. We have been pushing the EU very hard and, despite the protectionist instincts of some of its members, we have agreement on "essentially all" products, but we need to follow the negotiations about what "essentially all" means, and try to make sure that only a very small

number of products are excluded. I should be grateful for the hon. Gentleman's help in taking forward those negotiations.

Danube

2. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): If she will make a statement on actions taken to unblock the Danube since 1 December. [100349]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): We remain prepared to provide assistance through the European Commission to unblock the Danube, provided that agreement can be reached among the member states of the Danube Commission to allow the work to start.

Mr. Dalyell: Is my hon. Friend aware that, when my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and I were visiting the technical officials of the Ministry of Reconstruction in Belgrade in September, they made it clear that we would be whistling in the wind to think that there would be any co-operation until such time as the dollars and deutschmarks are on the table not only for pulling out the debris but for the reconstruction of the bridges themselves? In those circumstances, given the dire situation for Bulgaria, Romania and other countries caused by the severing of one of Europe's main arteries, cannot some agreement be reached that does not rely on saying that Mr. Milosevic is a dreadful man?

Mr. Foulkes: My hon. Friend must accept that the real problem rests with Milosevic. His Government have consistently refused to allow the river to be cleared unless we agree to rebuild the bridges, and he knows that that is unacceptable. Let me tell my hon. Friend also that the blockage can be bypassed by using a section of the Belgrade canal system—but Milosevic will charge the countries that my hon. Friend has just mentioned exorbitant prices for the privilege of using that section. My hon. Friend must at last realise that the villain of the piece is Mr. Milosevic.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Will the Minister accept that the blockage of the Danube means that Romania and Bulgaria have paid a heavy economic price for their support of NATO in the action over Kosovo? What impact does he believe the blockage has had on those countries' economies, and how much development assistance and aid are Britain and the international community giving them to make up for the price that they have paid?

Mr. Foulkes: Of course those countries are suffering, and I said in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) that there is a way round that problem. The key lies with Mr. Milosevic. In the meantime, we are providing substantial aid. Over £90 million has been provided by the British Government alone for reconstruction and help in Kosovo and the region. We continue to discuss with the other countries ways in which we can help them in the future. The Stability Pact is an important area of co-operation. Of course we want to do everything that we can to help those countries to prosper.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I have recently had meetings with the Bulgarian ambassador, the Ukrainian ambassador and Romanian MPs, one of whom represents a Danubian port and whose constituents have lost 2,500 jobs because the Danube is blocked. Does my hon. Friend accept that the country that is least hurt by that problem is Serbia? Will the Government stop taking this rather petulant line and look after the emerging democracies, which after all supported the Minister's point of view?

Mr. Foulkes: I, too, have spoken to the Ukrainian ambassador and to Ukrainian and Bulgarian Ministers. They recognise where the problem lies. It is a pity that there are not good Back-Bench Members of Parliament like my hon. Friend raising this question with Mr. Milosevic, but of course it is a different story there: we have a vibrant democracy—that is the difference.

St. Helena

3. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): What plans she has to visit the island of St. Helena. [100350]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no plans to visit St. Helena. However, officials from our Department will be visiting the island in January 2000 to discuss with the St. Helena Government the country policy plan for the next three years.

Mr. Russell: It is just as well that the Secretary of State has no plans to visit that remote island because it has no airstrip, and the only ship, which is the only way to reach the outside world, is currently off the high seas undergoing repairs. I sincerely hope that it will be repaired in time for the January visit.

Does the Minister agree that there is considerable anger and dismay among the people of St. Helena about their treatment by this Government and the previous Government, which contrasts with the treatment received by the people of the Falkland Islands?

Mr. Foulkes: The Government recognise the problems of access to St. Helena. I am pleased to tell the House that this week we have agreed to a comparative study that will investigate the relative costs of air and sea access. It will identity the most effective, least costly permanent solution to the island's international passenger and cargo transportation needs. I am sure that it will be widely welcomed.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given its importance to the increased self-sufficiency of the economy and to its sustainable prosperity, will the Minister tell the House what steps the Government envisage taking to assist in the diversification of the island's economy?

Mr. Foulkes: That is what my officials will be discussing with the councillors of St. Helena when they visit in January next year. That is part of the country's

policy plan. We are keen to see diversification. We are keen also to see private investment and enterprise. At present, the Government are subsidising St. Helena more than any other area, island or country other than Montserrat, by about £2,000 per person. We want to see economic development so that that subsidy does not have to continue at that level.

Tropical Diseases

4. **Mr. Nigel Beard** (Bexleyheath and Crayford): What steps are being taken to help developing countries combat malaria and other endemic tropical diseases. [100351]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): Malaria is one of the world's biggest killers. One million people die as a result of it each year—90 per cent. in Africa and many of them children. The World Health Organisation is leading a roll back malaria campaign more systematically to apply the best treatment and prevention methods. We have committed £60 million to this programme. We are working with others on polio. I made an announcement of our final tranche of commitment today: polio will be eradicated from the world within five years. That is about to be achieved, and it will be a wonderful achievement. We are also working to improve TB treatment and AIDS prevention and supporting the elimination of river blindness in Africa and elephantiasis worldwide.

Mr. Beard: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. As the overwhelming emphasis of interest of pharmaceutical companies lies in diseases of the developing world, and given that expertise in developing medically useful drugs lies almost exclusively with those companies, will my right hon. Friend consider meeting them to discuss how the development of relevant drugs for tropical diseases might be given greater emphasis in future?

Clare Short: Yes, indeed; my hon. Friend is absolutely right. All the science, skills and research lie with the big pharmaceutical companies. The poverty of the countries that need new drugs means that the market will not bring those drugs to the people. I have already met Glaxo and SmithKline Beecham. We talked with the World Bank about the way in which we can get the public and private sectors working together both to engage in research and to bring products to the market. I am pleased to say that there is some co-operation. That is part of the WHO's roll back malaria campaign. We need new drugs because an immunity is developing to the existing drugs.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Is the right hon. Lady aware that, because of global warming, there are projections that the malaria area will spread northwards and southwards? Given that, what assessment has she made of the economic impact of the United Nations, decision that DDT might be banned in future, will have on developing nations?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Malaria is spreading, including dangerous forms of it that go straight to the brain and can kill quickly. In the interests of people in the developing world and of ourselves, we need to roll back malaria. The systematic application of what we know—such as bed nets for children with the appropriate chemicals on them—can massively reduce the incidence. I have not examined the DDT question specifically. We are putting a great deal of effort into the roll back malaria campaign. I am optimistic that we can reduce the incidence of malaria, thus preventing the spread and saving many lives in the developing world.

Kosovo

5. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths** (Edinburgh, South): If she will make a statement on progress made on the repair of damaged houses and provision of alternative warm accommodation for refugees returning to Kosovo and on the support given by her Department. [100352]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is co-ordinating efforts to provide warm winter shelter for the 700,000 people in need.

UNHCR, the European Community Humanitarian Office—ECHO—and the United States Agency for International Development—USAID—are distributing emergency repair kits and roofing repair kits in order to create dry shelter in repairable houses, on the basis of one room per family. Further places are being prepared in collective centres and host families.

Our Department aims to complement these shelter initiatives by helping to keep essential power and water supplies going during the winter.

Mr. Griffiths: While it is welcome news that a contribution is being made to ensure that people do not starve or freeze to death, is my hon. Friend aware of the pressures on the non-ethnic-Albanian communities, and will he ensure that every possible support is given to those communities, as well as to the ethnic Albanian communities?

Mr. Foulkes: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are concerned about violence against Serbs. We have made known our concern, which I know is shared not just by my hon. Friend but by the whole House.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Have the Government managed to persuade all those involved to clear the backlog of trucks that are waiting at the Macedonian border? Has the essential equipment that has been held up for so long got through to all corners of Kosovo?

Mr. Foulkes: The hon. Gentleman has identified one of the problems. The road at Blace is a minor road, but it now serves as a major international communications route. That is causing problems. We have done everything possible, along with the international agencies involved, to try to get it cleared, and we shall continue to do so.

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative

6. **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): By how much the poorest countries qualifying under the heavily indebted poor countries initiative will benefit from the agreement on debt reached at the Cologne summit. [100353]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): The proposals for enhanced debt relief agreed at the annual meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in September, which were originally put forward at the Cologne summit, will provide $50 billion of debt relief, which is more than twice as much as before, and will provide a sharper focus on poverty reduction.

The G7 also agreed at Cologne that all aid debts of HIPC countries should be cancelled, once they have qualified for HIPC. That is worth an additional $20 billion. In addition, the existing Paris Club relief for HIPC countries is $30 billion. That brings the total to $100 billion available for the HIPC countries. The UK Government are extremely grateful for the work of the British faiths and churches and non-governmental organisations for all their campaigning, which made that agreement possible.

Mr. Healey: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that reply. Can she confirm that the Government are prepared to consider a 100 per cent. debt cancellation in certain circumstances, and can she outline the criteria that will be used to determine eligibility for that extra help?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has made it clear that, after countries have qualified for HIPC, he, together with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—I emphasise that, because who pays for the initiative is important—will be willing to increase the debt relief to 100 per cent. The countries that qualify will be spelled out. I am sure that they will be those that are focusing on the economic change needed to improve their economies and reduce poverty.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Does the Secretary of State agree that the debt relief programme for the poorest countries, like access to world trade, should be tied to the treatment of children, and that countries that use child labour without providing a proper education and opportunities for children to broaden their lives should not have access to debt relief programmes, any more than they should have access to world markets?

Clare Short: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman at all. He adopts the same position as the American trade union movement, with which I also disagree. There are 250 million child labourers in the world. They are in the very poorest countries, and only 5 per cent. of them are in traded sectors. It is not that their parents do not care for them; their families are poor and the children work to get food. We need development programmes that help those countries to grow their economy and reduce poverty. Trade sanctions would entrap them in perpetual poverty and perpetuate child labour. It is the wrong remedy. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman should not heckle me. He is wrong.

Afghan Refugees (Iran)

7. **Mr. Jim Cousins** (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): What steps she is taking to assist the relief of Afghan refugees in Iran. [100354]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): The Government and people of Iran have shown great generosity in hosting large numbers of Afghan refugees. My Department has recently agreed to fund a number of projects in order to improve health and education services and to promote small businesses.

Mr. Cousins: I welcome what my hon. Friend has had to say about recent improvements, but does he recognise that the fate of those 1 million Afghan refugees in Iran could be a major destabilising factor in the politics of that troubled region? Will he continue to offer every possible assistance to alleviate that problem?

Mr. Foulkes: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are providing £1.5 million for the refugee assistance programme, which we shall continue to support. The Afghan donors support group is meeting today in Ottawa. I was going to be there, but I felt it more important to be here to answer my hon. Friend.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [100378] **Mr. Nick Harvey** (North Devon): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 December.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further such meetings later today.

Mr. Harvey: What hope and reassurance can the Prime Minister give to distressed families in Bristol, Liverpool and elsewhere, including my constituency, who years ago underwent the grief of burying babies only now to discover that hospitals retained hearts and other organs without telling them? Given the breakdown of NHS accountability in Bristol when I and others first began asking questions, how confident are the Government that hospital authorities will give full and frank answers to the chief medical officer's investigation? Will the Government keep open the possibility of a public inquiry to examine witnesses under oath and recommend changes in the law?

The Prime Minister: I entirely share the concern of the hon. Gentleman's constituents and, indeed, many people up and down the country whose original tragedy has been compounded by this dreadful affair. It is precisely for that reason that the Health Secretary has

announced an independent and full inquiry. That will be completed as soon as possible. We are quite determined that the practice should be stamped out.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Does the Prime Minister agree that Steven Spielberg's project, which is worth tens of millions of pounds to our economy, is simply excellent news for Britain? Thus encouraged, will he support Lord Puttnam's campaign to preserve some of Britain's oldest cinemas, so as to pass that physical aspect of our heritage to the 21st century?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted at the news that Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks are to make their new production in this country. It is tremendous news for the entire British film industry, and shows the good state of British art and culture.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Does the Prime Minister accept that the Deputy Prime Minister's strategy of persecuting the motorist, undermining the road haulage industry, botching the sale of air traffic control and abandoning even the pretence of a policy on London underground is a complete failure and does not remotely represent an integrated transport policy?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept a word of what the right hon. Gentleman said. In this area, as in many others, what is actually happening is that, after 18 years of Conservative neglect, we are having to sort out the problems that we inherited—but we are sorting them out.

Mr. Hague: What an utterly complacent answer. If the Prime Minister thinks that transport is improving, he is viewing it from the window of a Daimler heading down the M4 bus lane.

I have here the Government's annual report on their commitments, which says, item:

"Develop an integrated transport policy."

Assessment: "Done." The Government actually think that they have done it, but the only thing that the Deputy Prime Minister has integrated is a chicken masala with an afternoon nap.

The Deputy Prime Minister said last year:

"I will have failed if in five years' time there are not fewer journeys by car . . . I urge you to hold me to it."

Car use has increased by 13 per cent. since he took office. What is there to show for his two and a half years of stewardship of transport?

The Prime Minister: Let us leave aside the jokes and consider the policy position. It is correct that road usage has increased, but there has also been a 15 per cent. increase in rail usage, a 12 per cent. increase in London underground usage, and, for the first time, an increase in the use of buses. In other words, there is an increase in demand on the whole system. We will spend more on transport, more on London underground, more on London transport, more on road maintenance and more on railways than the plans that we inherited from the Conservative Government proposed. That is not a joke; it is policy, which will make a difference to the people of this country.

Mr. Hague: The question was about what had been achieved. The Government's annual report states: "integrated transport policy—done." I shall outline their achievements: shambolic U-turn on the tube—done; botched plans for air traffic privatisation—done; hypocritical attacks on car drivers—done; attacks on the haulage industry—done; complete failure of the railways—done. We do not know where the Deputy Prime Minister is, but now that the Prime Minister has appeared on the front cover of "Hello" magazine, is it not time that the Deputy Prime Minister was in "Goodbye" magazine?

The Prime Minister: I have already explained the increased pressures and the increased usage of public transport and the roads. How do we ensure that we spend more money on transport—[HON. MEMBERS: "What have you done?"] Conservative Members ask what we have done—I shall tell them. We are spending £500 million more on transport than the plans that we inherited proposed; indeed, we are spending over £500 million more on London transport. In addition, there are 1,800 new rural bus services under this Government; we have completed the Jubilee line, which the previous Government botched; and we have sorted out the channel tunnel rail link, which was a total mess when we took over. Of course, there is more to do, but we are doing it far better than Conservative plans and policies ever accounted for.

Madam Speaker: I call Mr. McDonnell.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): Me?

Madam Speaker: McDonnell is the name.

Mr. McDonnell: It is nice to be recognised. The Prime Minister will know that this morning a listening device was found in the car of the president of Sinn Fein. Will he launch an immediate inquiry and make it clear to all sides—possibly even to our security forces—that nobody will be allowed to undermine the peace process?

The Prime Minister: I never comment on security allegations and I do not intend to do so now.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Given the Prime Minister's statements on the road this week, has he had an opportunity to examine the main findings of today's Joseph Rowntree Foundation report into deprivation and poverty in our country? Two and a half years into a Labour Government, with a rock solid majority and supported by a benign economic scenario, which of the main conclusions depresses him most: the greater proportion of people on low incomes; the growing gap between those on low and medium incomes; the increasing number of young people who have to be counselled for drug abuse; or the steady increase in premature deaths, especially in the north of England and Scotland?

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Gentleman does not point out, as the authors do, that the report covers

only a short period of the Government's tenure, before the main policies that we introduced have taken effect. Those policies include: a record rise of 20 per cent. in child benefit; the working families tax credit; and the new deal for the unemployed. The Liberal Democrats opposed the latter policy, which has meant that approximately 360,000 young people have got the chance of gaining work or skills for the first time—150,000 are now in unsubsidised jobs. The issue is not whether we agree that poverty exists, but what we do about it. We are acting on it.

Mr. Kennedy: I am sure that the Prime Minister, like the whole House, would acknowledge that there is a correlation between income, environment and life expectancy. That being the case, is it not profoundly concerning for us all, and most of all him, that the life expectancy statistics are that much notifiably worse in the north of England and in Scotland than in other parts of the country? Does that not point to the need for a drastic upgrading of Government policy to give more help to those most in need—not only middle England, but those who elected the Government and are looking to them for most but getting least?

The Prime Minister: Again, the life expectancy variations are far greater within nations or regions than between them. Rather than trying to divide up the country, surely we should be united around policies that target need wherever it exists—whether in inner-city Glasgow, London, Liverpool, Manchester, Plymouth or any of our main cities. All have problems.

I agree that there are urban problems and rural problems, too, but that is why we have policies such as those that I have outlined: the minimum income guarantee for pensioners; the working families tax credit, which I was talking about a moment ago and which will give an income boost to 1.5 million low-income families; the 10p starting rate of tax; the minimum wage; and paid holiday, which many people in this country are getting for the first time. The difference is that we now have a Government who recognise that tackling those problems is part of the responsibility of the Government. We are not indifferent to social exclusion, in whatever part of the country it exists. We want to tackle it, and that will take time, but we have a policy agenda—which I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will support—that will tackle it.

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): While the Government are clearly right to tackle poverty and inequality wherever they exist, will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to say from the Dispatch Box that it is Government policy to create prosperity throughout the nation and, at the same time, to reduce the disparities—especially those relating to infrastructure—between the more and the less prosperous regions of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: Of course it is, and my right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that there are disparities between regions as well. My point, simply, is that the disparities that stand out as starkly, if not more so, are those between different income groups within regions. As for regional development and infrastructure, he is absolutely right, which is why 60 per cent. of the increased spending on development agencies is going to the northern parts that need it most. We have to get more investment into those areas to attract jobs and companies, and that is precisely what we are doing. *[Interruption.]* As for the hecklers on the Conservative Front Bench, let me tell the House that the one thing that I found, whatever part of the north-west I went to in the past two days, was that, whether people debated the north-south divide or not, everyone knew who was responsible for inequality in this country: Conservative Governments who, for 18 years, not only created social division but managed to wreck the economy in the process.

Q2. [100379] **Mr. Malcolm Bruce** (Gordon): As revealed in the diaries of my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) in *The Sunday Times* last week, it appears that the Prime Minister considers that being effective at one's job is a qualification for the sack. Given the ineffectiveness of Government policies, inasmuch as half our air space is being privatised and 500,000 homes are being built in the south-east in spite of the protestations that there is no north-south divide, how much more effective does the Deputy Prime Minister have to be before the Prime Minister will consider it safe to fall under a bus, if he can find one?

The Prime Minister: I cannot remember what I am supposed to have said about the hon. Gentleman according to the diaries, but I think that it may have been right, whatever it was. He should look at the policies that are being pursued. We are increasing transport expenditure. In relation to air traffic control, of course safety has to remain in the public sector. We are trying to strike the right balance between public and private finance to do the reconstruction work necessary to make our air traffic control system work properly. It is the same with the tube. Only under the Labour party's proposals does the private sector take the risk on construction contracts with the public sector running the essential service. It is called public-private partnership, and it is the right policy for the country.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): Will my right hon. Friend assure the 3 million workers who are now entitled to four weeks' paid holiday a year that we will protect those rights to the utmost? The Conservative party has said that it would scrap them. It would also scrap the minimum wage and the 26 new rights at work that we have introduced. Is that not typical of a scrap heap Opposition? *[Laughter.]*

The Prime Minister: Conservative Members can laugh as much as they like, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Come the next election, we will remind people that the Government introduced paid holiday and the Conservatives would take it away; that we introduced a minimum wage and they would scrap it; that we introduced the working families tax credit and they would take that away; and that the Conservatives opposed the extra increase in child benefit and are opposed to the £100 that pensioner households are receiving this week. I suspect that, when the Conservatives fight the next election on those policies, there may be a little less smiling.

Q3. [100380] **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): Now that the Prime Minister has returned from his visit telling people in the north-west that there is no north-south divide, will he turn his attention to the very real divide in the provision for cancer services across the country? The Christie hospital in Manchester receives half the revenue funding that is given to the Royal Marsden, even though the two hospitals are the same size and do the same things for the same number of patients. Will he come up with the resources that the Christie needs to have its own intensive care unit, so that it can be declared a cancer centre for surgery for the north-west, which is the only region that does not have one?

The Prime Minister: When the hon. Gentleman compares the Christie hospital with the Royal Marsden, anyone would think that this problem had suddenly appeared in the past two and a half years. We applaud the work that Christie hospital is doing, especially on cancer.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): It is not applause but money that it wants.

The Prime Minister: I was asked to stop applauding and give money. It is being awarded—£4 million from the new opportunities fund for specialist cancer equipment. That is giving money.

Q4. [100381] **Mr. Jim Cousins** (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): This Christmas, 500 dealers in the City of London will each receive bonuses of £1 million or more, whereas, as my right hon. Friend knows, every family in the north-east of England will be touched by the facts about poor health, low skills and poor opportunities which he set before the country this week. Will he assure all his many friends in the north that the formula for spending will reflect our needs and will enable the gap in health and hopes to be closed?

The Prime Minister: Of course we want to remove the gap in health and the education inequalities that exist up and down the country. It is precisely for that reason that we have committed the £40 billion of extra spending. The new deal for school buildings will benefit thousands of schools, including many in our constituencies. Health inequality is undoubtedly linked to poor income levels. Poverty is one of the great factors in poor health. We are targeting these inequalities through our policies such as the new deal for the inner cities, which will put £800 million into some of the most deprived inner-city areas. We are tackling these issues at source, wherever they exist. I really believe that, whether it is north, south, east or west, that is the best way to do it.

Q5. [100382] **Mr. Shaun Woodward** (Witney): The Prime Minister should know that, on 25 November, the director of nursing at Radcliffe infirmary in Oxford wrote to general practitioners in my constituency saying that there was now extreme pressure on the hospital, and asking them to slow down their rate of referral. A few days later, on 1 December, the director of nursing wrote again, saying that the hospital had now adopted the level 3 escalation procedure. Hon. Members may know, but others may not, that level 3 means that accident and emergency cubicles are full, that an overwhelming number of patients are on trolleys and that patients can no longer readily be taken off ambulances.

The Oxfordshire health crisis is severe, yet the Prime Minister, along with his Government, has overseen the closure of Burford community hospital. The chairman of the community health trust has resigned as a result. Will the Prime Minister listen? Will he keep the hospital open? At the very least, will he agree to review the matter personally?

The Prime Minister: The decision about Burford was made by the local health authority. I understand the hon. Gentleman's unstinting support for the hospital, and I do not in any way diminish the point that he has made or the pressures that people are under. I witnessed some of those pressures when I visited a hospital in Manchester. We are trying to improve the situation by reducing the pressures, through new services such as NHS Direct, large amounts of additional funding and the recruitment of extra doctors and nurses—there are thousands more in the system than when we came to office. Improving the situation will take some time, however, because the accumulated problems are extremely serious.

Q6. [100383] **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): In the context of the recent national debate on the way forward for health care, is the Prime Minister aware of events in Warrington? While the local hospital was modernising and improving its services, a private hospital that had been built in its grounds went bust and has now been bought by the NHS. Does the Prime Minister conclude from those events that the Tory plans to privatise health care are not only morally indefensible but economically illiterate? What would he say to the health care workers whose service was described by the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) as thoroughly second rate?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate everyone at Warrington hospital on the work that is being done there. We are trying to provide new services to make access to the health service easier. Yesterday and today alone, 1.5 million people have visited the service NHS Direct on-line, and nearly 1 million have now contacted NHS Direct.

New services are being provided, but we understand the pressures that people are under. What would be disastrous is the Conservative plan—described as a Trojan horse policy by the Conservative health spokesman—which would mean that in non-urgent cases, including hip replacement cases, people would be forced to take out private insurance. Many simply could not afford to do that.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): How much have the Government spent so far on the national changeover plan in preparing to join the euro?

The Prime Minister: As we announced at the time, we will spend some tens of millions of pounds on that, but it is absolutely the right thing to do, ensuring that British business is prepared for something that will affect us in any event.

Mr. Hague: The question was how much has already been spent on the national changeover plan. The Government are spending millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on preparing to join the euro early in the next Parliament, but they will not say how much has been spent. When challenged, the Northern Ireland Office gave details of the tens of thousands of pounds that it had already spent, but other Departments have been instructed not to do so.

Yesterday, the Home Secretary said in the House:

"Unnecessary secrecy in Government . . . has long been held to undermine good governance . . . and my party has long been committed to change."—[*Official Report*, 7 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 714.]

What is the ball park figure? What has been spent so far—£10 million, £20 million, £100 million?

The Prime Minister: As I said a moment ago, when we announced the plan we said what the cost would be. *[Interruption.]* We announced what the cost would be, and people therefore know how much we will spend on the changeover plan. *[Interruption.]* People know how much we are going to spend. The issue is whether it is sensible to have a changeover plan. Our answer is that it is sensible, because otherwise we would not be in a position either to be prepared for the euro—which will affect business in this country—or to join the euro, even if the country voted for it later.

Mr. Hague: Well, "people" evidently know how much we have spent so far. Will someone tell the Ministers in the Government where the people are who know the answer because Ministers are not able to provide the answer? Only the Northern Ireland Office is able to provide the answer—congratulations to the Northern Ireland Office.

When the Governor of the Bank of England and the outgoing lord mayor of London speak of the City thriving outside the euro and the vast majority of people in this country want to keep the pound, is it not time to drop the Prime Minister's commitment in principle to join the euro and his commitment to make a decision early in the next Parliament? Then the cost of the national changeover plan can be reduced to zero.

The Prime Minister: That is a fascinating example of the difference between the right hon. Gentleman's jokes, lines and gags and policy, because the two people he has mentioned—the Governor of the Bank of England and Lord Levene—are actually both in favour of the changeover plan. There is no point the right hon. Gentleman looking dazzled by that; it is true. Therefore, as ever with him, he can make as many smart comments as he likes, but, in the end, the question is: is it sensible to have the changeover plan or not? The two people whom he has just quoted support the changeover plan. They support the policy of prepare and decide. I quote the Governor of the Bank of England—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I have had enough of Members who are shouting from sedentary positions.

The Prime Minister: The moment we move to policy, Conservative Members are disconcerted by it. They cannot work it out. The Governor of the Bank of England said:

"This, in my view"—

describing Government policy—

"provides a solid foundation for a continuing, positive and constructive relationship between the United Kingdom and other EU member states, including those participating in . . . the euro."

In other words, the policy that we have of prepare and decide is the right one. Why? Because, first, it will affect business. From 1 January 2002, those notes and coins will be in circulation. British businesses will be doing business in Europe, so to scrap it, which is the right hon. Gentleman's policy, would be absolute rubbish. When he gets back up, let him name one single business organisation that supports that. Secondly, it allows us—*[Interruption.]* Let him name one business organisation that supports that.

Secondly, under prepare and decide, it gives us the option. He would rule out the option—if he is not going to have a changeover plan—for ever. That is, of course, where Margaret Thatcher and the new right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) are pushing him. What this country wants is not a Leader of the Opposition pushed around by those who want to take his job, but a Prime Minister who actually gets on with the job.

Q7. [100384] **Mr. Gwyn Prosser** (Dover): Is my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister aware that 39 towns have applied for special city status to celebrate the new millennium? Can he confirm that, overwhelmingly, the most coherent and convincing bid has come from Dover? Considering our proud history and our attractive gateway location and given that, in the British Isles, the very first sunshine of the new millennium will break over our famous white cliffs, does he agree that, on 1 January 2000, when Dover gets its special status, it will be the best reason for celebrating since we won the seat of Dover from the Tories on 1 May 1997?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly tell my hon. Friend that no one puts the case for Dover better than him. However, if I had to adjudicate between all the bids now, it would be very difficult. What is absolutely sure is that, while Dover and the Government are marching forwards into the 21st century, the Tories will be marching backwards.

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): A very important decision will soon have to be taken on the next British synchrotron, and that decision will have big implications for future investment in big science and important implications for international collaboration. Will the Prime Minister take a personal interest in that important decision?

The Prime Minister: I certainly will take a personal interest in it. As I explained to people in the north-west when I was asked about the project, in which they also have an interest, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is closely considering it, and I shall closely consider it, too. We will have to take the best decision in the interests of science and technology.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Have you received a request from the Minister of Agriculture to make a statement on the catastrophic effect that the Intervention Board's decision—if it is allowed to stand—to remove from Devon the last over-30-month scheme abattoir would have on the farming industry and on animal welfare standards?

Madam Speaker: No, I have not. As the hon. Gentleman will know, if the Government intended to make such a statement, it would have been notified on the Annunciator by noon today.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker, of which you have prior notice. In the light of uncertainty on the matter, Madam Speaker, I wonder whether you are able today to inform right. hon. and hon. Members whether the Palace of Westminster will be open on new year's eve.

Madam Speaker: A number of hon. Members have raised with me the issue of whether the House of Commons should be open on new year's eve for the benefit of hon. Members and their families. I have made a very clear decision that—apart from a party for family and friends in my private apartments, which I normally hold on new year's eve—the Commons should remain closed on that night. Separately, I understand that the Royal Gallery in the House of Lords will be used earlier in the evening for a Government function.

I have based my decision that the House should be closed on the grounds of safety, expense and—most of all—consideration for the staff of the House, who should be allowed to be with their own families on that night.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), the Prime Minister implied that he was responsible for expenditure, out of the new opportunities funds, on the Christie hospital, in Manchester, whereas the Prime Minister is responsible only—

Madam Speaker: Order. That is a matter of political argument and not for me. What is the hon. Gentleman's point of order, to me, which I might be able to resolve?

Mr. Blunt: I believe that the Prime Minister has inadvertently misled the House, Madam Speaker. What arrangements are there for him to be able to correct the record?

Madam Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman believes that the House has been misled and wants to clear up what he thinks is an erroneous point, he must find other ways of asking the Prime Minister a question on it.

Opposition Day

[1st Allotted Day]

Tube Investment

[Relevant documents: Seventh Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1997–98, on London Underground (HC 715-I) and the Government's response thereto (Cm 4093); Ninth Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1998–99, on the Integrated Transport White Paper (HC 32-I) and the Government's response thereto (HC 708).]

Madam Speaker: I have to notify the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.33 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I beg to move,

That this House regrets the Government's failure to raise private investment for the London Underground; condemns the cuts in investment in the Underground since they took office and the way their failure has squeezed other parts of the transport budget; recommends dropping the failed public private partnership, seeking more private money in another way; and calls on the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to take the necessary action now to expand all types of British transport capacity, including the Tube, so people are able to travel more easily and businesses can move their goods around efficiently; condemns the Secretary of State's failure to make crucial decisions to expand the mainline railway; regrets his decision to make the motorist a whipping boy for his own failure; urges him to follow planning policies which lessen the North South divide rather than worsen it, and which will encourage more people to live near town centres and their points of access to trains and buses rather than on greenfield developments; and concludes that the experiment in so-called joined-up Government between environment, transport and the regions has under this Secretary of State comprehensively failed.

I have declared my interests in the register—including the fact that my wife works for British Airways—but I am not here to speak on behalf of those interests today. I am here to draw attention to the chaos and crisis that is the Government's transport policy.

In the past two days, as I lay on my sick bed—[Hon. Members: "Oh!"] I am glad that there is so much sympathy. As I lay on my sick bed, with a temperature as overheated as Labour's south-east plans and a chest as congested as Labour's road network, I had the one comfort of knowing that my headache was likely to pass in a couple of days, whereas the huge headache caused to the Government by their transport plans will not only be with us for a very long time, but will get worse and worse. The Government's transport policy is not working, cannot work and will never work. They said that all that they had to do was to tax and hound motorists off the road and they would then go by tube or train instead. After two and a half years of that ridiculous policy, there are more cars on the road, trying to make more journeys, and the policy now looks at if it is in complete chaos.

The Government's transport policy has recently been given some go-faster stripes by the No. 10 Downing street spin doctors, but it is still stuck in standstill Britain—still caught in the same old traffic jam that the Government have deliberately created.

The Deputy Prime Minister has been forced to admit that traffic volumes cannot be cut when the economy is growing, so why did he come to office saying that he would do exactly that? Why does he persist in saying that there is an easy answer to get the motorist off the road, while doing nothing to provide that vital alternative that might give the motorist a better way of getting somewhere? It was a great Labour lie that the new Government would improve public transport. Two and a half years on, we see a group of Ministers wedded to their chauffeur-driven cars, busily slashing investment in the tube. Ministers may laugh, but they will not even answer my questions on how often they go to the office by tube or bus. We all know that they will not answer because the answer is never. The Secretary of State is wedded to his car and the Prime Minister is so wedded to his that he even uses the bus lane in it.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): How many members of the Conservative Government used to take the tube or bus to work regularly?

Mr. Redwood: I used to walk to the office every time that I was in London. I have not seen the Secretary of State doing that.

The Government are slashing investment in the tube and dodging all the important decisions on the railways. The Deputy Prime Minister has shown himself well able to arrange a chauffeured car to go just 250 yd downhill at Bournemouth. Will he try his organising skills on securing more investment in the tube so that Londoners can move around as easily? He has shown himself adept at planning a diving trip to the Maldives. Could he use some of that energy to expand the capacity of the Welwyn viaduct so that more people could come to London by train from the north? After his recent passage to India, could he do something to relieve the worst stretches of congested highway nearer to home? I wonder what India had done so to upset the Government that the Deputy Prime Minister was sent there to talk to them about how to run a transport system.

Mr. Michael J. Foster (Worcester): As a former cricketer, I shall try to bowl the right hon. Gentleman a nice slow one. Will he confirm a quotation from him in November 1996? He said:

"We have gridlock. In many parts of the south-east the traffic queue from one junction runs into the queue for the next. The M25 regularly seizes up. Everyone tells me that something should be done."

Given his other reputation as being not of this planet, will he tell NASA what he has done with its space probe?

Mr. Redwood: I see that Walworth road has been working overtime with the hon. Gentleman. He clearly would not have thought of an intervention of his own. Labour cannot claim to have invented traffic jams, but it is clear that the Government have deliberately made them worse, longer lasting and more frequent on important stretches of road. The outgoing Government had road schemes that would have tackled those congestion problems, but this Government cancelled them. The outgoing Government had plans to bring in private capital for the tube and the railways, but this Government have put a spanner in the works. That is why they, not the previous Government, are to blame. Is it not about time that the Government recognised that they are governing the country, two and a half years into their period of office?

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): My right hon. Friend will know that a scheme in Weymouth was ready, with planning permission and everything else dealt with and approved by Labour and Liberal Democrat councils, and could have gone straight ahead under the private finance initiative when the Government came to power. After two and a half years, we are still waiting to know whether the scheme will go ahead. In the mean time, when Ministers have come, they have had to sit in traffic jams trying to get into Weymouth.

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend makes his point powerfully, underlining my point that the Government have made the chaos far worse, creating problems and then having the audacity to blame someone else.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: No, I must make a little progress, because many people wish to speak.

Only six miles out of every 100 travelled are journeys by train. If the Government woke up and decided to implement the 50 per cent. increase in railway capacity that is being suggested by the privatised industry, it would take care of only two years' growth in travel requirements. That is worth doing, and we recommend it, but it will not solve the problem of congestion. They need to sort out the road system as well as the railway system.

The Deputy Prime Minister has had proposals from Railtrack sitting on his desk for two years now. They involve paying more for new facilities and less for what is already available. Why can he not make up his mind? Why will he not sit down with Railtrack and negotiate a satisfactory package? Does he not realise that he has become the chief obstacle to expanding the railway network?

Many train travellers would like the Government to get on with the job and to make it easier for companies to run more trains. Will the Secretary of State tell us when there will be action on the Welwyn viaduct and when Paddington will be restored to capacity?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman appears not to be giving way.

Mr. Redwood: Does the Secretary of State accept that important engineering works are needed for the safe running of more trains into many of the main London terminuses? The Opposition recommend that the Government do a deal with Railtrack to ensure that the main bottlenecks in the network are dealt with by investment in extra track and signals. We urge the Government to let others into the network, building sidings and branch lines to give more businesses a rail freight option. It has started to happen thanks to privatisation; it now needs some encouragement from the Government. That is the common-sense approach.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman agrees that, on this crucial issue,

[Mr. Bill Rammell]

politicians should be judged by not what they say now but what they did when they were in government. Does he recall an article by Anatole Kaletsky, who writes for *The Times* and is hardly a friend of the Labour party, in the weeks before the general election saying that one of the issues that would force him to consider voting against the Conservative party was its complete contempt for the public interest in transport? Why does he think that Anatole Kaletsky wrote those words?

Mr. Redwood: I do not agree with Mr. Kaletsky's judgment on that issue, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman lives up to his fine words. He signed the early-day motion against the Government's half-baked idea of selling off the National Air Traffic Services on the cheap. I trust that he will vote with his conscience, and then I will give him more credence.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, while some Labour Members have a little local difficulty over the National Air Traffic Services, it is nothing that cannot be sorted out over some good old-fashioned beer and sandwiches? Does he acknowledge that what unites Labour Members is our determination to expose the appalling record of his Government, who scrapped schemes such as crossrail, made a hash of the channel tunnel rail link and deregulated our bus services with a resulting decline in bus usage? Does he accept that the best thing that he could do this afternoon is apologise for the record of his Government?

Mr. Redwood: The Opposition are setting out some bold and innovative ideas which will make a real difference to the railway and road systems and to transport generally. Again, I look forward to the hon. Gentleman joining us in the Lobby when the issue of NATS is decided. We have strong objections to Labour's proposals. Some Labour Members, for different reasons, are equally strongly against them. We trust that they will do the right thing. I should be very surprised, however, if beer and sandwiches were on offer these days. I think it is Italian fare only for Tony's cronies at No. 10.

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South) *rose—*

Ms Ward *rose—*

Mr. Redwood: I must now make some progress.

The Deputy Prime Minister's attitude to Railtrack has perplexed and angered many an observer. First, he blamed Railtrack for the problems of the railway and then he made it the preferred single bidder to take over the Circle and District lines. Finally, he completed the summersault and stopped Railtrack bidding for those lines.

It was never a good idea to burden Railtrack with responsibility for the tube. We warned the Deputy Prime Minister against it when he first thought of it. Railtrack will be stretched enough to raise all the money that it needs to improve the main line railway. The tube needs billions of pounds of investment in its own right. The Deputy Prime Minister's public-private partnership is two and a half years late, ruinously expensive and already a laughing stock.

A public-private partnership lies at the intersection of new and old Labour. The Deputy Prime Minister will point to the public part of it; he naively sees it as a way of spending public money without having the Treasury breathing down his neck. The Blairites point to the private part of it, stressing how new and third way it will be. As a result of the rows between the two schools of thought, nothing ever advances or gets better. Tube travellers have to put up with higher fares and an unreliable service. When it comes to transport investment, third way has so far meant no way.

The two public-private partnerships on the Secretary of State's agenda—NATS and the tube—are causing endless rows between himself, No. 10 and the parliamentary Labour party, which supports him or the Prime Minister from time to time.

The Deputy Prime Minister attracts more friendly fire than anyone in the Government, and that is saying quite a lot. I dislike the snobbish disdain that the teenage scribblers at the centre of this Government often seem to show for the Deputy Prime Minister. It does not make his difficult task any easier. I hope that Labour Members support me in this.

We learn that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is eyeing up the Deputy Prime Minister's job. We hear that No. 10 is wild about the way in which the Deputy Prime Minister has upset the motorist. We hear of growing impatience about the lack of results from anything the Deputy Prime Minister touches. We are told by a trade union leader—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House must come to order. The right hon. Gentleman can barely be heard.

Mr. Redwood: We are told by a trade union leader that the Deputy Prime Minister is in the evening of his political career and, by sources close to the Prime Minister, that he is not up to the job.

Ms Ward: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: Not at the moment.

Labour promised us joined-up government, which would be easier to achieve in a mega-Ministry. The Ministry could, for example, use its planning powers to ensure that more new homes were built in cities and towns, near to train and bus stations, rather than out on green fields near motorways and bypasses. That, in the Government's terms, would be joined-up government. Instead, we have broken-down government. They decide that more homes should be built as far away as possible from the Victorian pattern of railway lines and stations serving the main industrial towns and cities.

The Government could use their planning policies to encourage a northern renaissance and to limit development in the south. That would remove some of the extra strain that will otherwise come on to trains, buses and tubes in the south. That would be joined-up government. Instead, we have broken-down government. They decide to plough on with more development in the south, even though there is not enough capacity at the moment to transport people who are already there.

The Government could grasp that people do not use their cars out of malice or spite, but because often there is no alternative. It would be joined-up government to

have people drive to a station or bus stop and be able to park there. It is broken-down government to do absolutely nothing to make it easier for people to park and ride.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will my right hon. Friend take it from me that it is the greatest possible compliment to his continuing parliamentary effectiveness that, every time he leads a debate, the pre-programmed robots on the Labour Back Benches seek to destabilise him? Does he agree that it is an absolute disgrace that, last year alone, the Secretary of State clobbered the road user to the tune of £32 billion and spent less than a fifth of that sum on transport?

Mr. Redwood: It is a disgrace.

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ms Ward: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman must be allowed to answer one intervention before he can take another.

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is absolutely right. One of the main reasons why this Government are in such chaos over transport is that they are robbing the motorist, but are not spending enough on transport industries. They either have to raise money from the private sector or they have to spend taxpayers' money. They cannot make up their minds, and they end up spending nothing.

Mr. Stewart: The right hon. Gentleman says that there is no investment. What does he say to constituents in Salford who have seen the Government support the introduction of the metrolink?

Mr. Redwood: One swallow does not make a summer, and there are occasional investments even from this mean Government. However, if one looks at the overall impact, it is simply too little, too late.

Ms Ward: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. If he is so concerned about passengers on the railways, will he explain to the House why he is opposed to the introduction of the Strategic Rail Authority, which would ensure that there were tougher regulations on the rail companies and that the consumer got a better deal, with improved safety on our railways?

Mr. Redwood: We oppose more bureaucracy, and we think that the railways need some decisions from this Government, so that the railway industry can get on and invest the massive sums that are clearly needed. The hon. Lady was so busy trying to intervene that she was not listening, but I have already said that there are crucial decisions that only the Secretary of State can take. Once they are taken, billions of pounds of new investment can be brought into the railway industry. However, the franchises need to be renegotiated with the train companies and Railtrack needs a better system of revenue so that there is a fairer balance between new and old capacity, which would make a big difference to its investment plans.

It is broken-down Government to stop people getting around. Indeed, in many cases, the Government make it much more difficult to park and ride, because in many towns and cities now one cannot drive easily into town even to park at the railway station. The Government tell us that they want an integrated transport policy. Perhaps the Deputy Prime Minister could tell us today whether we yet have one, two and a half years into a Labour Government who said that it was one of their most important policies. Or is that integrated transport policy as delayed as the tube public-private partnership? His idea of an integrated transport policy seems to be a lay-by on the A1 where he can swap Jaguars as he speeds south.

Today's news from the Rowntree Foundation that the gap between rich and poor has started growing again under this Labour Government is further proof that Labour is not working. We were promised a year of delivery. Labour told us that it would make things fairer by helping the less well-off into work. Instead, it has followed policies that have decimated jobs in northern manufacturing areas and stimulated jobs in the southern service economy. That has made its transport problems so much the worse.

The Government have become expert only at making rhetorical U-turns. Clobbering the motorist proved unpopular, so now we are told that they are the motorist's friend. Meanwhile, the Government still pile on extra taxes and make it much more difficult to drive around. If the Opposition had not stood up for the motorist, would we ever have been told that a change of language was needed? If the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* had not championed the motorist's cause, would we now be hearing warmer words about the car? Cutting all the bypasses and road improvements the Government inherited proved so unpopular that we are now promised a review. Which of the 103 bypasses and road improvement schemes that the Deputy Prime Minister scrapped will he now definitely reinstate?

Today it is time for the Deputy Prime Minister to give us some answers. He has created standstill Britain and it is time that he found ways to get us back on the move.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Redwood: I shall not take any interventions for the next section of my speech. I hope that the House will listen carefully, because I am sure that the Deputy Prime Minister would like to hear my questions. The nation will regard those questions as fair, and the press and the wider public deserve answers. Let us see how we get on.

When does the Deputy Prime Minister expect to reach agreement on his latest version of the public-private partnership for the tube? How much money is he planning to make available in the meantime to improve the tube? When will investment on the tube get back up to the levels of the last few years of the Conservative Government, and why has he cut it so much? Will his private-public partnership make air-conditioning available on trains as our Londoners tube scheme would have done? Will his public-private partnership enable him to build the Chelsea-Hackney line, as our Londoners tube scheme would have done? As it is unlikely to do any of those things, why does not the Deputy Prime Minister adopt our scheme, which would deliver much-needed large increases in investment at no cost to the public accounts?

[Mr. Redwood]

What is the Deputy Prime Minister's estimate of the fees and charges he has incurred, and will incur, putting together his public-private partnership? Has he apologised to Railtrack for wasting £20 million of its much-needed money on preparing a bid for the tube, which he has now deliberately blocked? Does he realise that our Londoners tube scheme, which would sell shares and give free shares to all Londoners, could be allied to a bond issue by the new companies that would raise large sums for the tube? Will he rule out bond issues for his version of the public-private partnership? Would he confirm that, because he is not selling a majority of the shares in the tube, any bond issue he wanted would count as public spending and the Treasury would continue to block him from doing that?

On the railways, will the Deputy Prime Minister tell us when he intends to meet Railtrack to respond to the company's plans for incentive payments to provide more capacity? How long will it take to negotiate new franchises with all the train operating companies so that they can get on with the important task of investing in more and newer trains?

When will the right hon. Gentleman take seriously the question of car parking arrangements at rail and tube stations? Does he understand that better car parking is crucial to persuading more people to get out of their cars? When will he start to remove the many impediments placed in the way of drivers trying to get into town and city centres, some of whom want to get into town so that they can park at the station?

When will the Deputy Prime Minister announce that building 550,000 new homes on the green fields of the south-east would be wrong from every point of view—wrong on grounds of transport and of planning, and wrong because it would make the north-south divide worse?

Will the right hon. Gentleman today rule out the possibility of a foreign company, especially one influenced or controlled by a foreign Government, buying our air traffic services on the cheap for a knock-down price? *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I have a lot of good will, and especially at this time of year, but some hon. Members are making great nuisances of themselves. If they persist, I shall have to name them. I know exactly who they are, and I now ask for proper order in the House.

Mr. Redwood: When will the Deputy Prime Minister be able to announce some signed contracts for new road schemes? How much extra money is he making available for roads over the next two years, in view of the big cuts that he has made so far and the U-turn that was announced for him by No. 10? Will he explain why, after two and half years, investment in public transport is down, while the volume of traffic is up, and congestion and taxes have risen?

The Government have failed to provide the public transport that we need so that we can have a choice. They have presided over an opening up of the north-south gap. They watch helpless as thousands of dynamic and talented people come south, and all the Prime Minister can do is tell us on the radio from Merseyside that there are a few rich places in the north as well.

The Prime Minister and his deputy show how one can go from Jags to riches by coming south. When will they do something to help the people whom they are paid to represent? Their transport policy is rip-off Britain. The motorist is fleeced at the pump, the British haulier is taxed off the road, the tube traveller has to pay ever-higher fares, and less than one fifth of the money collected from road users is spent on transport.

The Government are the biggest rip-off merchants in Britain. They are the masters of stealth taxes and the muggers of the motorist. We need a big expansion of capacity in transport. We have shown how private money can modernise the tube and expand the railway, while at the same time leaving us cash to spend on bypasses and road improvements.

When will the Government realise that they must take action now to avoid total gridlock in the years ahead? That requires big new money, which must come either from free enterprise or from the taxpayer. The third way is much delayed: it is in grave danger of being completely cancelled.

3.58 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the Government's approach for an Integrated Transport Strategy; deplores the previous Government's record of under-investment in transport, fragmentation of bus and rail services and encouragement of ill-planned out-of-town development; in particular condemns their erratic investment in London Underground, which left a £1.2 billion backlog; welcomes the Government's long-term strategy to secure over £8 billion investment for upgrading London Underground over the next 15 years; deplores the official Opposition's plans to privatise London Underground; and welcomes the Government's commitment to an extra £1.8 billion for public transport and local transport plans, improving road maintenance, reducing pollution, and encouraging the major investment needed to widen transport choice.".

I do not think that that speech was worth coming back for. Have I come all this way to hear a vote of no confidence based on a speech of such poor quality? I should have stayed in India.

In passing, I note that the Leader of the Opposition has chosen to make some remarks about India. I thought that they were rather insulting to the largest democracy in the world, and to its people. Discussions of climate change problems are the big picture where transport is concerned. We have nothing but respect for the Government of India. The remarks made by the Opposition are terrible and should be withdrawn.

My expert advisers tell me that, of all the trees in the world, the densest is the redwood. The speech by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) certainly lived up to that reputation.

When this debate was announced, the right hon. Gentleman toured the studios and briefed the newspapers, saying that he would table a vote of no confidence. As there is no such vote in the motion, I assume that he did not have the support of the Leader of the Opposition. Or perhaps he examined the record and bottled out: he realised that he could not justify a vote of no confidence. Nothing in his speech today could justify the motion. There was an awful lot in it comparing records, and I intend to address that.

In July, *The Times* described the right hon. Gentleman's new transport policy as

"a blast of stale air."

It referred to muddled thinking, uncosted plans, contradictory statements and "cheap populism". Five months later, the same judgment can be applied to the right hon. Gentleman's speech today. The phrase "shameless opportunism" sums it up. The right hon. Gentleman's opportunism is not just limited to transport—on the day I heard him on the radio accusing the Government of betraying the coal industry, I really learned the meaning of the word. And playing party politics with the Paddington tragedy was beneath contempt. Thankfully, that was rejected by the Leader of the Opposition. Today's motion is another example of opportunism and hypocrisy.

The right hon. Gentleman said that the Government have done nothing to improve transport. Let us compare the record of the Tory Administration, in office for 18 years, with that of this Government, who have been in office for two and a half years. The Opposition's last spending plans, published in their Red Book, would have cut almost £1 billion from transport expenditure over the past two years. In 18 years, the Tories fragmented our national railway system in a cut-price privatisation that planned for stagnation, and then sold the system off cheap. They introduced competition and left us with deteriorating services heading for decline.. That is the common judgment on the privatisation of the railway system. The previous Government also failed to take a decision on train protection systems in the nine years after Clapham. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Miss Kirkbride, do you want to intervene? If not, keep quiet.

Mr. Prescott: In other words, shut up and listen.

Just two and a half years into a Labour Government, more than 1,000 extra train services run each day. We have taken a decision on train protection and created the Strategic Rail Authority to look after the public interest and lever in the investment that the right hon. Gentleman talks about. And we have appointed a regulator with a bite as well as a bark, by providing extra powers to ensure that the promises made by Railtrack and other bodies are carried out. The regulator told me that he did not have those powers before, and that is why I made those changes.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Prescott: In a second. The Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, rail users, train companies and everyone else all welcome the Strategic Rail Authority—except the right hon. Gentleman, who has apparently dragged his party along with him, Conservative Members on the Select Committee having previously supported our proposition. The right hon. Gentleman wants to know about crucial decisions on main line railways. How many times—

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Prescott: Sit down and listen to the record. The Tories have accused the Labour Government of doing nothing.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Prescott: Oh, sit down.

Mr. Jenkin *rose—*

Mr. Gray: On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I think that it is probably a point of frustration, but I shall hear it.

Mr. Gray: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I have the honour to serve on the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. The right hon. Gentleman has mentioned what I have said on that Committee, but he will not give way so that I may correct his mistake.

Madam Speaker: As I understand it, the Secretary of State is saying that he wishes to make some progress and will give way later.

Mr. Prescott: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Select Committee's record is there for all to see. I intend to continue to explore the record on the charges made against us.

Investment in the railways has been mentioned. How many times did the Tories announce the start of the west coast main line renewal during their 18 years in office? How many times did they do nothing? That renewal is happening now. Railtrack has let contracts worth nearly £800 million for the first phase of the upgrade. The right hon. Member for Wokingham asked why I had not agreed that. This afternoon, the European investment bank has announced a £400 million loan to help finance it.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Prescott: No. The Tories are going to hear about their record. They may not like it, but they are going to get it.

In 18 years, the Tories—

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Prescott: Just listen. The Opposition have a lot to learn. In their 18 years, the Tories deregulated buses.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Prescott: Passenger numbers went down by a third.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Madam Speaker: Order. Please sit down, Mr. Jenkin.

Mr. Prescott: They are going to hear it this time.

[Mr. Prescott]

Under the Tories, many villages lost their bus services; in just two and a half years, Labour has reversed the decline and created 1,800 new and improved rural services. In their 18 years, the Tories spent more than £70 billion on roads, but car per mile usage rose from 70 to 100—a 40 per cent. rise. Yet the right hon. Member for Wokingham has the audacity to talk about congestion.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Prescott: I am giving nothing.

The official roads survey of 1997 found that the condition of Britain's roads was the worst since records began in the 1970s. So after the Tories had spent £70 billion on them, the roads were at their worst since records began. Their legacy was potholes and disinvestment. There was one innovation of course—they gave us the cones hotline.

In only two and a half years, Labour has increased spending on road maintenance by 20 per cent. The shadow Secretary of State claims to be the motorist's friend, and says that we have imposed a tax on the motorist. But his Administration introduced the automatic fuel duty escalator from 1993. The Labour Government, in only two and a half years, has ended the fuel duty escalator.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Prescott: In a second.

In addition, any future real increase from fuel duty will be hypothecated to roads and public transport for the first time. No other Government have done that, and I hear nothing from the Opposition about it. Would they adopt such hypothecation?

Mr. Jenkin: I wish to place on the record my contempt for the Secretary of State's remarks about my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who has never sought to bring safety into party politics. It was the Secretary of State's remarks that lowered the tone of the debate on rail safety.

The Conservative Government invested far more in roads than the present Government are investing.

If the right hon. Gentleman is claiming to have stopped the automatic fuel duty escalator, will he now promise, on behalf of his right hon. Friend the Chancellor, that, in the next Budget, there will be no fuel duty increases over and above inflation?

Mr. Prescott: In relation to safety, it was the right hon. Member for Wokingham who appeared on television, within hours of the crash, suggesting that the issue was one for Government—[Hon. Members: "No."] I am afraid that it is a matter of record. I do not want to betray confidences, but the right hon. Gentleman knows what I am saying to be true.

Mr. Jenkin *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: I am trying to answer the hon. Gentleman's first intervention. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Prescott: It is also a matter of fact—the record is available for all to see—that the previous Administration admitted that the introduction of train protection was a cost consideration.

Mr. Jenkin: The right hon. Gentleman knows full well that the Government mounted an incredible media operation to dump the blame for the crash on Railtrack. *[Interruption.]* Everybody in the rail industry knows that he was keen to shift the blame. Let us put that behind us and ensure that rail safety is discussed in a level-headed and calm fashion, as I know that he and I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham would want.

Mr. Prescott: It was not me who undermined Railtrack; it was the report of the Health and Safety Commission, which suggested that there was a conflict of interest in Railtrack dealing with safety as well as providing and operating the rest of the railway service. That was also the conclusion—I believe that it was unanimous—of the Transport Sub-Committee which also concluded that there was a conflict of interest. The previous Government were warned about this by the then Opposition, but they took no notice—I am now trying to correct that fatal mistake on safety. I shall take no lectures on safety from the Opposition.

The Opposition's claim to be the friend of the motorist is certainly not borne out. To answer the question about fuel duty increases put by the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin)—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Members should recall the Chancellor's statement to the House. My right hon. Friend said that he would end the automatic fuel duty escalator; that is our position. However, my right hon. Friend offered the proposition that, if there was an agreement to increase that tax above the rate of inflation, that money—*[Interruption.]* As I understand it, for years, most of the motoring organisations have been asking why the money raised from the duty does not go into transport. The Chancellor has offered another opportunity—if the demand is there—for that money to be hypothecated for roads and public transport. That is what my right hon. Friend has done and it is clear—*[Interruption.]*

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: When money comes up, it certainly brings them up. I want to make some progress; I have given way enough—I have certainly given way more than the right hon. Member for Wokingham did.

After 18 years of Government, the Tories published a Green Paper in which they supported congestion charging. They produced a reasonable analysis of transport and, in our White Paper, I incorporated the consultations reported in their Green Paper. There was a consensus that we needed to improve the quality of public transport, because we simply could not build our way out of the problem. The Green Paper made it clear that congestion charging and parking charges should be considered. The Tories did

not say that they would introduce the charges—they did not have the courage to do that—but they suggested them as a possibility.

I am prepared to accept that the previous Administration realised that spending £70 billion on the roads did not reduce congestion, but increased it by 40 per cent. [HON. MEMBERS: "What are you doing?"] We are switching priorities to make public transport more attractive, so that people will make it their choice instead of using private cars.

Those were the conclusions reached by the Tories. In two and half years, the Labour Government have grasped the issue, legislated for it and brought about a radical change—one that is now supported by every leading candidate for the mayor of London, including one possible Tory one—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): I, too, do not think that the Deputy Prime Minister needed to come back for this debate.

Is the Deputy Prime Minister aware that there is a huge consensus, not just among mayoral candidates but among the general public and the business community, in support of the congestion charge that he has described to the House and for which he will legislate? There is a concern, however, that, as the congestion charge is introduced, somebody in the Treasury may take a chance to reduce the transport grant to London. Could my right hon. Friend set those fears at rest by giving a categorical undertaking that that will not happen?

Mr. Prescott: We have made it clear that there will not be a reduction in other grants and we have made it clear that any congestion charging has to be transparent and directed towards public transport improvements. That is written into the Greater London Authority Act 1999 and it will be written into the Bill that I shall bring before the House. It is additionality, and I think very important additionality.

Where I disagree with my colleague on this matter is that he seems to believe that such charging can be introduced in a year or two. Reports suggest that it cannot be done for three or four years, but things might move faster if my hon. Friend became the mayor of London—I do not know. I suspect that charging has more to do with filling that old gap in the public financing of the London underground.

All the mayoral candidates agree about the charge. Every one of them, from the Liberal Democrat candidate to my colleagues who are standing in the election, has chosen congestion charging because it will provide an extra source of income to make up the difference in the London underground system. We will have some debates about that as the process goes on.

Mr. Redwood: Can we just check a little more on this promise, which has been half given to the House? Will the Secretary of State tell us how much money he is guaranteeing from public funds from his budget for the London underground for the years 2000–01 and 2001–02?

Mr. Prescott: I will give a statement on that at the appropriate time. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] There is nothing clever in that. We are putting our public expenditure in place over three years and we are in the process of negotiating the second round of that. It is then that we shall make a decision about resources; there is nothing new about that.

Mr. Redwood: Does that not prove the point that there is no guarantee at all? It is not even written on a worthless piece of paper. The Secretary of State does not even know whether he has got any money to let the London underground have in the next two years. We cannot believe a word of the claim that the hypothecated money will make all the difference. It is quite obvious that the right hon. Gentleman will be stitched up by the Treasury.

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Gentleman seems to forget that we are negotiating the whole public-private partnership for the underground, which will bring investment in on a more sustained level over a longer period than any other Government of either party has been able to achieve. It is a bit much for the right hon. Gentleman to talk about investment in the underground when the sum that he had in his Red Book was £161 million even though £700 million a year was supposed to be available for investment in the underground. I shall come to the right hon. Gentleman's other point in a second.

The right hon. Gentleman has changed his mind a number of times since he became the Conservative party's spokesman on the subject. On congestion charging—

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood) *rose*—

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman should fight his election campaign outside the House.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham does not think that it is right for people to pay charges that will finance public transport and better roads. To be fair, he has made that clear in the House and in the debate. However, from what I hear of his statement, he is apparently quite happy for people to pay tolls on private roads. That money will go into private pockets, and he thinks that he can build roads quickly.

I was interested in the remark, "Going private will get it all speeding along and will open up the business." May I give the right hon. Gentleman a good example of what the Opposition did when they were in government and embarked upon the private sector fast-track for the Birmingham northern relief road? It was Tory Government in a nutshell.

The project saw the light of day in 1980, just after the Tories had come to office. First, it was in the public sector, but they took it out of that because, they said, they were putting it on the fast track. Then it was put in the private sector, and not an inch of the road had been built by the time they left office in 1997. Seventeen years is a fast track for the private financing of roads—cor blimey!

I will give the right hon. Gentleman fast track: it took me less than three months to decide to get on with it, and we will begin building the road next year. That is in the first two and a half years of a Labour Government. *[Interruption.]* The Tories' charges are totally untrue.

I turn now to something that is near to my heart—the shipping industry. In 18 years, the Tories decimated the British shipping industry. We were an island nation with barely a British-registered fleet. We lost more than 1,000 ships. In two years, Labour has reversed the decline

[Mr. Prescott]

through the tonnage tax proposals and shown what can be done. All types of ship—including containers, cruise liners and tankers—are coming back to the British flag, and, with a doubling of the fleet tonnage in 12 months, the red duster now flies with pride. We told the right hon. Member for Wokingham that we could do it, and we have done it.

Instead of the cuts in transport spending by the previous Administration, we have provided an extra £1.8 billion for public transport and roads, including £700 million for the local transport plans, £300 million more for buses, £300 million more for railways on top of the annual subsidy of £1 billion, and £400 million extra for roads.

The best vote of confidence in the Government's transport strategy has come from the transport industry itself. It realises that Labour is here for a long time and that it has a long-term strategy. Rail companies have increased their private investment by one third, to nearly £2 billion a year. Bus companies have doubled their investment to £400 million a year; and overall private sector investment is up to £4.4 billion, compared with £3 billion three years ago. We can make public-private partnerships work—and the industry welcomes them—even though they failed under the previous Administration.

On planning, I am staggered when I hear some of the charges made by the right hon. Member for Wokingham. I am surprised that he wants to drag planning policy into the Opposition motion. He made a quick reference to that and moved on, and I was not surprised. In 18 years, the Tories allowed an explosion of out-of-town shopping centres. The number rose from 450 in 1986 to 1,000 in 1997. Who was in the Department of the Environment during that period? It was the right hon. Member for Wokingham. If ever there was a case for combining the Department of the Environment with the Department of Transport, the Tories' planning decisions on out-of-town development prove it singlehandedly.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham's remarks about the north-south divide were opportunist. They are the latest example of such opportunism. The Tories invented the divide between the north and south to which he referred. The right hon. Gentleman is now showing concern for the disparity that his party created and then widened in its 18 years in government.

In two years, Labour has introduced regional development agencies. *[Interruption.]* Hang on and listen. The Opposition now want to abolish them—is that right?

Mr. Redwood *indicated assent.*

Mr. Prescott: Good. They would deny the English regions all the advantages that development agencies have given Scotland and Wales, which have enabled them to reduce the disparity between them and the English regions. The right hon. Gentleman would deny that opportunity to the English regions. I hope that he will make that very clear come the election.

The right hon. Gentleman made the point that more money should be available for London. Let us look at the Tory record on London. After 18 years, the Tories left London Underground with massive under-investment, a £1.2 billion backlog and a hopeless contract for the Jubilee line extension which starved the rest of the system of investment. The crazy contract for the Jubilee line which was negotiated by the previous Administration means that the project is now two years overdue and £1.23 billion over budget. We had to correct that crazy judgment.

In 1989, the Tories produced the central London rail study. I thought that it was quite a good study and would lead to something. Eight years later, when they left office, what did we have? The Chelsea-Hackney line was just a line on the map, and the right hon. Member for Wokingham is asking me why I have not finished it in two and a half years. Crossrail is in the long grass. The Jubilee line extension is a shambles, and Thameslink 2000 is going nowhere.

After two years, Labour has established the Strategic Rail Authority, which is already beginning to have an effect and getting a firm grip on all the complexities of integrating the national rail system and the underground system. We have rescued the Jubilee line and the collapsing channel tunnel rail link. When I took office, I was told, "You will have to pay £1 billion more as we are giving in the keys." I said, "Leave them on the table. I will not be exploited and I will not ask for £1 billion more." I renegotiated the contract and we did not pay the extra £1 billion. The scheme is now on budget, on time and with Railtrack. I am grateful for any good job that is done. When in government, the right hon. Member for Wokingham did not make a proper decision and put a lousy contract together. Labour has rescued the project in two and a half years.

I shall announce tomorrow that the Thameslink 2000 project, which was delayed for many years by the Tories, is ready to go before a public inquiry. We can now get on with that. We have launched the process of public-private partnership to modernise the tube. That is the legacy that we shall leave for London in the coming elections. We have invested more than £5.5 billion, which the London mayor will inherit. We are proud to pass that legacy to the people of London. We are to be contrasted with a Government who stole control of their transport system. *[Interruption.]* What we are doing is better than giving the money to shareholders, and it reflects good judgment as regards public accountability.

The Conservative Government chopped and changed London Underground investment grant year by year. Each year, they announced funding plans for the next three years, but London Transport hardly ever received what the Tories promised. The result was predictable: the massive £1.2 billion backlog in tube investment that we face today. The Monopolies and Mergers Commission—

Mr. Gray: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Prescott: Let me deal with the point.

The MMC, which was set up by the Conservative Government in 1991, examined London Underground financing, recognised the decline in services and ordered an inquiry. It said that £7 billion was needed over the next 10 years and at least £700 million a year in core investment. That is not for the Jubilee line but for core investment. What did the Tories do? After one year of

increased spending during 1993-94, they cut support to £200 million and continued the disinvestment. The previous chairman of London Transport, who was appointed by the Conservative Government, said:

"Vital investment in the Underground will have to be put on hold because of a one third cut in Government grant . . . The cuts mean that hundreds of modernisation schemes have been placed in jeopardy."

That is precisely what I inherited and the difficulties that have to be dealt with now stem from that.

Mr. Townend *rose—*

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way.

Mr. Prescott: I have not.

Mr. Townend: Will my hon. Friend give way to me?

Mr. Ottaway: No. Sit down. When the right hon. Gentleman's public-private partnership—

Mr. Townend: The right hon. Gentleman is frightened.

Mr. Ottaway: Just shut up, will you?

Madam Speaker: Order. That is my job.

Mr. Ottaway: I apologise.

When the right hon. Gentleman has his public-private partnership in place, will he still need Government subsidy or will the operating profit cover the cost of the investment of the PPP?

Mr. Prescott: That is a reasonable question. I shall make an announcement about a report in a moment or two. The hon. Gentleman will be able to see the Price Waterhouse report. This is an important matter and we want more information about the public debate. I intend to provide that information today. The hon. Gentleman was the Opposition's spokesman when the Greater London Authority Bill was being considered in Committee. He had the honesty to admit that insufficient resources were going into London Underground and that something had to be done. That is a reflection of the previous Administration's record. However, the hon. Gentleman is not on his own in that respect. Even the hon. Member for North Essex was moved to confess:

"We did not do enough for the tube—I would be the first to acknowledge that".—[*Official Report*, 27 January 1999; Vol. 324, c. 436.]

[Interruption.] We can argue about what we are doing now, but not enough was done by the previous Administration.

Mr. Jenkin: Our plan is to release capital into the tube by putting it into the private sector. In the last three years of the Conservative Government, we invested £3 billion in the tube. In the right hon. Gentleman's first three years, he will have invested slightly more than half that sum.

Mr. Prescott: That is not true. The hon. Gentleman is using a calculation of public and private investment. He seeks to differ from me on public and private and then amalgamates the figures. He admitted in January that the previous Administration did not do enough. The point about disinvestment is right, and that is what I have to deal with. We can argue about the best way of raising the money and whether to privatise the tube. Looking back at the privatisation of rail, the sale of rolling stock companies—ROSCOs—and the sale of our assets at a loss of billions of pounds to the taxpayer, I do not have great hopes of anything that the Conservatives would sell if they came to power.

We know exactly what the Conservatives were planning from their Red Book—a cut to £161 million this year.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Prescott: No. The previous Administration proposed £161 million this year for tube investment. We are providing £760 million—four times as much—in investment in the tube for the year of comparison.

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: I must move on—my time is almost up.

Just as important, we have levered in an extra £170 million investment through the private finance initiative this year, bringing the committed total to more than £1 billion. We need a stable long-term investment programme, which our public-private partnership will provide.

I hope that both sides of the House will agree with one point: the Treasury rules that apply to the funding of our public sector industry do not guarantee long-term financing. That is one of the major critiques of financing by the state. At times, public sector industry competes with schools and hospitals for funding, and I believe that education and health should take priority. It is a public expenditure priority problem. A contract for investment, rather than a decision taken by politicians, will ensure investment over a longer period. To avoid disastrous consequences for the long-term development of the underground, I want it to cease to be a political football.

There are various choices for funding the underground. We can leave it as it is, with public sector financing. That creates serious difficulties. There is the public bond option, which is currently the subject of debate and unites several candidates for mayor.

There is no magic in bonds. I have used them in certain cases. Private bonds were used in the case of the channel tunnel, and on the London docklands. A judgment must be made as to whether bond financing would suit the circumstances of the underground. It is a matter of how much can be earned on the income stream and how much investment can be obtained. To assist the House, the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, which has just been published, is available in the Library, so hon. Members can study the arguments.

According to PricewaterhouseCoopers, if bonds had been used to fund the Jubilee line extension, we would have been faced with a bill of £1.5 billion to meet the cost overrun. The report makes interesting reading, and I invite hon. Members to read it carefully.

Ultimately, as the House knows, the judgment must be made against the public sector comparator. That is what we are required to do. The PricewaterhouseCoopers

[Mr. Prescott]

document informs the debate and gives a clear steer that the PPP is the right choice. It would save £4.5 billion, which could be spent on education, health and other priority needs. That is the public expenditure priority problem.

What PPP really stands for is: publicly owned, in which I have always believed, publicly run and properly financed. Once the assets have been modernised by the private sector, they will be returned to the public sector as a fully publicly owned and operated facility.

Mr. Ian Bruce *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: I cannot give way. I am taking up the time of the House.

In conclusion, in place of 18 years of Tory indecision, underinvestment, fragmentation and a declining public transport system, we are fundamentally changing its direction.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Prescott: In our White Paper, the first for 20 years, we set out our vision, with legislation—now before the House—to provide new powers, radical new forms of finance, a new framework for public transport and accountability to the public.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: Doing nothing is not an option. I am not promising the quick fixes that the House has heard from time to time. I am offering and delivering long-term solutions and making decisions, controversial as they are. We will have a transport system that is well worth supporting. I will not offer quick fixes, as did successive Secretaries of State for Transport, who for years ducked the controversial issues and refused to face up to them. A transport revolution, to build a fully integrated transport system of the quality that this country needs and deserves, is what I shall be offering to the people.

I hope that the right hon. Member for Wokingham will reflect that, in marching up the hill with his confidence vote and climbing down again in humiliation, he has exposed the shameless opportunism and lack of judgment that the Opposition show in so many areas.

4.35 am

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): It is only in politics that one has the opportunity to be a maiden twice over. I first entered this House following a by-election just before Christmas in 1984 in the wake of the death of a Conservative Member. I enter it again today in very similar circumstances. I have to be acutely aware that I am here today only because of the untimely death of Alan Clark.

Alan Clark is greatly missed in Kensington and Chelsea, where he had many friends and was regarded as a very fastidious Member of Parliament. He is also very much missed in the House. We are told that, these days, the public like their politicians to have a hinterland, and Alan Clark had acres of that. He shocked and entertained millions of people by writing about that hinterland in his diaries. Those diaries became best-sellers, and Alan Clark became a national figure.

In the diaries, there emerged a picture of a man who was frank, outspoken, sure of himself and candid. He came to the House to do what we are elected to do; he thought for himself and spoke up. The sympathy of the whole House goes to his widow, Jane, for her very untimely loss.

I have a very demanding constituency; I have no doubt about that. It is home to many of the movers and shakers in our nation, particularly in business, media and arts. It also has some of this country's great institutions. It has the museums of south Kensington, the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, the Royal Marsden and the Royal Brompton hospitals—great national institutions indeed. The constituency is also one of villages and communities, where people live among wonderful heritage. They are determined to work and fight for the retention of their way of life and the character of their community.

Many of the statistics on Kensington and Chelsea would lead one to believe that it is a very affluent area, but it also has its range of problems. We certainly have a fair number of refugees living in bed-sitting rooms along the Cromwell road; we certainly have a number of homeless people. I am here as the representative of all those people, too.

We also have many elderly people living in leasehold property who are struggling against unscrupulous landlords. Many are facing the expiry of their lease and demands from freeholders for sums of money that they cannot possibly afford. They are living in great anxiety. Those people were promised a great deal by this Government, and they have been duped by this Government. No legislation on the subject of leasehold reform has been forthcoming. I shall fight in this House to ensure that the Government are shamed into acting on their promises.

What can my constituents expect from me? I have here an item that has been brought to me from Australia. It is an inflatable cushion, which is known simply as "Portillo". The House might be interested in some of its characteristics.

"Portillo for unrivalled comfort . . . Portillo for ease and convenience . . . Portillo has 1001 uses"—

and some advice for the Government—

"Grab Portillo in the palm of right hand, inserting thumb into opening and grip firmly".

Perhaps that advice was intended for those on this side of the House. The instructions contain a warning to hon. Members:

"The rolled-up Portillo is simple to have bounce back to its full size and shape."

I want to speak about transport, and I declare an interest because I am an adviser to two energy companies. All the candidates in the by-election discovered that it was almost impossible to find voters at home and that the only way of finding them was by going to the underground in the morning during the rush hour and catching a blurred glimpse of commuters as they rushed past. My constituency is full of underground stations and commuters. Those people have been deceived by the Labour party. As I shall demonstrate, there has been no extra investment in the underground; indeed, the Labour Government have invested less in it. Although the system is crowded, there are no proposals for new additions to it.

People become especially indignant when Ministers are completely out of touch with commuters' daily experience. Ministers talk about driving people out of their cars as though the public transport system were running empty. They talk as if people were driving cars out of sheer bloody-mindedness. That is not so. Many drive because the public transport system is crowded and unreliable, yet the Labour Government have not proposed any additional capacity.

The Government's only achievement is the creation of a privilege lane on the M4. I call it that because commuters who are stuck in a jam every morning see plutocrats—perhaps donors to new Labour—whizzing by in taxis. The bus lane is misnamed; a bus is hardly ever seen in it. Anyone who believes Government statistics that claim to show that traffic is moving on the M4 should be put into a home for people who believe the Government's statistics. I am keeping an eye on the bus lane, which is currently for "buses and taxis only", and awaiting the day when it is for "buses, taxis and ministerial cars only".

I was Transport Minister for two years. *[Interruption.]* Oh yes, and I am extremely proud of the previous Government's record. We ordered the Jubilee line extension, and we built the docklands light railway, which we extended to Lewisham and Tower Hill. We put the trams into Manchester, Sheffield and Croydon, and extended the railway system to Stansted and Heathrow airports. We electrified the east coast main line, and caused the channel tunnel to be built. The Government have not made a single public transport announcement. That is a disgrace.

We had a vision for London. We planned to relieve the congestion in the west of London and on the M4 corridor by building new rail and road links to the east. We built many new river crossings across the Thames in the east so that we could bring prosperity to east London. Yet, with all those new rail links, Ministers will travel to the dome on new year's eve by car—another snub to the public transport user. What is the Deputy Prime Minister's vision for London? The Government have no such vision.

Government investment in the underground has been lower than in any year under the Conservative Government. The Deputy Prime Minister tried to shrug that off by talking about the money that went into the Jubilee line, as if our investment in it was worthy of condemnation. *[Interruption.]* If the right hon. Gentleman will listen, I can tell him that, even excluding the money that we invested in the Jubilee line, in every recent year bar one, our investment in the core of the underground was greater than that of the present Government.

The Deputy Prime Minister's hopes for the future are only hopes because he has put them all in the idea that the public-private partnership will produce the investment that is necessary for the underground. When I was the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, our officials reckoned that they could recognise those Ministers who were suckers. I think that the Treasury saw him coming, because it persuaded him that, with a public-private partnership, there was no need to put any money at all in the Government public spending plans for investment in the underground. I can imagine the scene when it said to him, "Don't worry, John. We'll see you all right if the thing goes wrong." The thing has gone badly wrong. He was then given another £365 million to spend over two years. What has happened to that? It has gone into the black hole of the Jubilee line extension.

Mr. Prescott: It is your contract.

Mr. Portillo: The right hon. Gentleman does not deny it. That money has gone into the black hole of the Jubilee line extension; it is not available to fund the core of the underground. He ought to be concerned about that, because I heard the Prime Minister say that he was investing more in London underground than the previous Government. That is not true, and I have proved it. Now the right hon. Gentleman has admitted that what little money there is, is going not into the core, but into the black hole of the Jubilee line extension.

The right hon. Gentleman finds himself with no money—the cupboard is bare—and he is quite wrong to put all his hopes in the public-private partnership because I do not believe for a minute that those bidders will come forward with anything other than a demand that they should continue to receive public subsidy. Some mayoral candidates are in the Chamber, so may I ask in their presence whether the right hon. Gentleman now proposes that all those decisions should become subject to the authority of the mayor of London, since they will slip into the middle distance and be taken during the mayor's period in office? He is in a hopeless position: having sacked Railtrack, what will he do about the sub-surface lines? He has no plans for that whatever. I listened carefully to his speech and list of achievements, but all that the Government have done is establish structures, commission reports and integrate things. My constituents want some railway lines to be built, but he has not provided any new capacity.

At one stage, it was suggested that the Opposition should table a motion proposing a cut in the right hon. Gentleman's salary, but I am pleased that my right hon. Friends decided, in their wisdom, not to pursue that—first, because he is the fall guy in this situation—perhaps a naive fall guy—and, secondly, because it is so painfully obvious that the Prime Minister intends to cut his deputy's salary to zero. The only question is on which date that will happen.

Mr. Prescott: Pathetic.

Mr. Portillo: The skilful briefing from Downing street has set the vultures of Fleet street hovering around the right hon. Gentleman's corpse, and he knows it. The only question for Londoners is whether the change of Secretary of State will at last mean that they will get a change of policy and the policies that they need and so rightly deserve.

4.48 pm

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): I thought that the speech made from the Conservative Front Bench was a record effort, but it is clear that the rejuvenated retread—the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo)—outdoes even the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) when it comes to barefaced cheek.

This country had to put up with years of neglect, particularly of public transport, by a Government who were clearly governing without due care and attention.

[Mr. Frank Dobson]

Worse than that, their policies were stupid and fragmented the public transport system, leaving all sorts of places outside the major conurbations—rural areas, in which the Opposition claim so much interest—virtually bereft of the bus service that they were used to and breaking up our railway system in an extremely damaging way. The situation here in London is unique in its history: the roads are absolutely choked, which is damaging business severely; the Confederation of British Industry estimates that the delays are costing business in London £21 billion a year; those delays are seriously inconveniencing people who want to get about in London; and the fumes caused by the traffic are seriously damaging the health of Londoners, particularly old and young people.

Mr. Gray: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I shall not. *[Interruption.]*

Because of the blockages on the roads, buses provide an extremely unreliable, slow and inefficient service. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but there is an outbreak of sedentary comments. Far too many are being made, and the right hon. Gentleman should be heard with more respect.

Mr. Dobson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Worst of all, the Government inherited no sensible plans to improve the service to Londoners. Having come a poor second to Lord Archer the first time that the Tories chose a candidate for London mayor, Steve Norris is now apparently the chosen person. He was the Minister for Transport in London and we are living with the consequences of his negligence.

However, when it comes to negligence, Steve Norris's record does not compare with the adverse impact on Londoners of the record of the newly elected right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea, who started damaging London's transport system even before he became Transport Secretary. As Chief Secretary to the Treasury, for almost a year he obstructed the proposals of ABB in Derby to provide new rolling stock for the Northern line, and insisted on a different contract, which went to another company. Because the Conservative Government was behind that contract, it was a stupid, ridiculous, incompetent contract, and the rolling stock still has not been fully delivered. We are still living with that inheritance.

The right hon. Gentleman went on to claim credit for the Jubilee line and to discredit the present Secretary of State for having to meet the excessive costs of the ludicrous contract for which he was responsible. One of the big problems for London has not only been that the tube has been starved of investment, but that the huge sums of money made available for investment have been misused and wasted.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I shall not give way.

The Jubilee line extension is but the latest example of scandalous waste in major investment projects in London underground. They have all been characterised by huge delays and vast cost overruns. The cost overrun for the Jubilee line of £1,400 million is robbing Londoners twice. The money going into that project would have totally rehabilitated the Northern line. That sort of money is not available to rehabilitate the Northern line, so that scheme is 18 months late. The former Secretary of State for Transport is proudly claiming that he was responsible for that contract. Thank God he is not in government any longer.

Mr. Portillo: Merely so that the House may judge the accuracy of anything that the right hon. Gentleman says, I should tell him that I was never Secretary of State for Transport. The position that I held in transport I held prior to my position as Chief Secretary to the Treasury. In almost every particular, the right hon. Gentleman has got his facts wrong. Heaven help us if that is the best quality on offer as the Labour candidate for London. Poor old London.

Mr. Dobson: The right hon. Gentleman claimed credit for the contract, but I do not know whether he did so as a former Transport Minister, as a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury or for that matter as a former Secretary of State for Defence. He certainly claimed credit for it. I do not know whether he thought that he was putting a tactical nuclear weapon in south-east London.

Mr. Portillo: I realise that the right hon. Gentleman has not been well recently, so I do not want to trespass on him. He very courteously sent me a note telling me in advance that he intended to mention me in his speech, so his remarks were obviously premeditated. The idea that I took him by surprise when I mentioned that I had been Transport Minister is wholly erroneous.

The right hon. Gentleman got all his facts wrong, including the basic data about which posts I held at which time. That demonstrates the extent of his veracity, and the credence that we should attach to every word that he utters in his speech.

Mr. Dobson: Before the right hon. Gentleman reminded me of his miserable record as a Transport Minister, I was simply going to refer to the adverse effect that he had on Londoners when he was Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Unless my ears deceived me, he claimed credit for the existence of tram systems all over the country. I recall that, when he was Chief Secretary, the right hon. Gentleman did his best to foul up the tram system which, despite his worst efforts, has now been established between Birmingham and Wolverhampton. The Tory newspapers in Birmingham—whose editor-in-chief has, I understand, just been adopted as a Tory candidate in that city—commented that the last Government were so stupid that they could not make up their mind about whether to finance a tram system in "Brum", as they described it. The right hon. Gentleman interfered, and fouled up that proposition too.

We need more investment in the tube system—

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that specific point?

Mr. Dobson: No.

We need more investment in the tube system, but we need a change in the system to prevent the scandalous delays and cost overruns that we have experienced before. I believe that any solution must be subject to three conditions—conditions that would not apply under the Tories, because they want to privatise the underground wholesale. First, no arrangement should be made that does not leave every operational aspect of the tube in the hands and within the responsibility of the publicly owned and publicly accountable London Underground. Secondly, any arrangements that are made should be vetted at every stage by the Health and Safety Executive, and cleared by it for the purpose of either maintaining or improving current safety levels. Thirdly, whatever arrangements are made should give value for money.

I think that, subject to those conditions, it is wholly proper and reasonable for my right hon. and good Friend the Secretary of State to investigate the possibility of public-private partnerships. There is a very good example of public-private partnerships in London's transport system: the public-private partnership that has built the docklands light railway extension to south London on time and to price. That contrasts with the scandalous waste and delays that have affected the Jubilee line extension. If we are sensible and try to live and learn, we must learn from the example of the docklands light railway, and seek to apply it to any arrangements that we make for the tube.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Given the three preconditions for the public-private partnership that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, if a successful bidder were not found, would he favour a fully public-sector solution? If so, how much investment should be pumped into the tube?

Mr. Dobson: I am fairly confident that reasonable bids meeting all three of my preconditions will be found for at least some of the projects. We must look for a way of tying the sources of finance with some responsibility for the successful conclusion of the construction projects that they are funding. We should at least try to place a duty on those who have raised the money for the construction to organise the construction, and then to maintain the plant that they have supplied for a period of years, as a general contract. That would mean that, for the first time in the history of such contracts, the sources of finance would have a vested interest in delivering what had been promised. That would mean that, if the project were late, they would not get paid until it was done. If there were a cost overrun, of which there have been so many, private sector sources of finance would pick up the tab. They have never had to do that, in the past; the public have had to pick it up. The PPP-PFI approach is one way of achieving that.

One thing is privatised through that approach: the risks and the cost overruns. If people who have entered into arrangements to find the finance, to do the construction and to provide the maintenance fail to deliver, they will pay the price and no one else will. We should apply that approach, if we can, to the renewal of the tube.

It has been suggested that an alternative method of finance would be a bonds issue for the whole underground.

Mr. Livingstone: Hear, hear.

Mr. Dobson: My hon. Friend is a strong supporter of a bonds issue.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: I will not give way at the moment.

One of the arguments of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) in favour of a bonds issue is that it would cost less—he thinks—to raise some of the money, but people would be willing to take a lower return on their investment because, through a bonds issue, they take not a scintilla of risk; the public and passengers take the risk. Therefore, as I say, we have to come up with a system where private sector suppliers of finance take the risk. If we have just a bonds issue, they will get their money, whether every project is five months or five years late, whether there is a cost overrun of 5 per cent. or 500 per cent.—it is risk-free investment. Therefore, they will take a lower return. I do not think that that is the best way of proceeding.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I shall not for the time being.

As I say, we have the example of the success of the docklands light railway. We also have—I refer to my previous incarnation a few months ago as Secretary of State for Health—the example of the private finance initiative for hospitals, which has financed the start of work on 19 major hospital projects in just about as many months. That is working.

Uniquely in the history of the health service, instead of hospitals being six months, a year or two years late, some hospital managements face a unique challenge as a result of PFI: they may have to take over some of the hospitals that have been built before the original scheduled date. That shows that, if we can tie in the sources of finance with the risk of the construction, they will ensure, in a way that no one has ever done by placing a public sector contract with the private sector, that they deliver what they promised. That is why I support that approach.

Mr. Brian Sedgemore (Hackney, South and Shoreditch): I am following my right hon. Friend's remarks and I think that he is going down the right road. Does he agree that, although there may be a case for issuing bonds in certain circumstances, there can be no case for issuing bonds of £7.5 billion at the same time as imposing a fares freeze for four years, there by making it impossible for there to be an income stream to pay back the bonds? People in the City may be stupid, but they are also greedy. It is inconceivable that they could agree to such a programme. Does he agree that London Transport's current profit, or surplus, of some £300 million per annum would be wiped out by a fares freeze and that it would be impossible to finance the thing at all?

Mr. Dobson: There is much truth in what my hon. Friend says.

I make another point before sitting down and giving other hon. Members the opportunity to speak. Even when the existing underground system has been fully renewed—I think that it is likely to happen under the Secretary of State's proposals—all that will do is provide the people of London with a decent, reliable ride on the existing system.

We also require additional capacity. That is why I strongly support the crossrail project, for which the City has put together a package. I welcome that package, but deplore the fact that, when the previous crossrail project was proposed, Conservative Members—who were then in government—did not lift a finger to help it. If they had supported the project—in their capacity as Transport Minister, as Chief Secretary to the Treasury or just as an oddball Cabinet member—and put their backs behind it, crossrail would now be well on its way to being built, rather than having to be started almost from scratch.

Many people who live in one part of outer London work in another part of outer London, and they find it almost impossible to get to work by public transport. I believe, therefore, that we need to have something like an outer Circle line, which will probably be a surface railway. Furthermore, some of the line could be provided fairly quickly—by connecting parts of the current system, making the system more systematic, and making a real effort to encourage people to use such a system.

In the long run—I admit that I am now engaged in describing only a wish list, rather than firm plans—there is scope in London for an outer, outer Circle line, joining up the outer boroughs, Heathrow and channel tunnel connections and increasing people's capacity to reach Gatwick and Stansted, so that we have a modern system that genuinely meets the needs of Londoners. We need a new approach to transport in London—an approach that moulds the system to meet the needs of Londoners, rather than forcing Londoners to fit in with our currently ill-shaped and outdated system.

In the short term, however, we shall not be able to make those improvements, as they all depend on long-term projects that will involve digging holes in the ground and improving the current tube system. In the short term, we shall have to make the bus system work far more effectively. We shall have not only seriously to enforce current restrictions on bus lanes and red routes, but to extend those restrictions, to give priority at junctions to buses. If we really want people to move in buses, buses will have to have advantages over other forms of road travel.

Such proposals will upset some people, but—there we are—they will have to be upset. I think that the bulk of people in London will welcome the proposals.

The Government have provided in the Greater London Authority Act 1999 for the introduction of congestion charging, which has been welcomed by almost all sensible people. Such charging will have to be done sensitively. Although it will also take time to introduce a properly effective system, when we do, it will raise money to spend on public transport.

On that matter, I differ slightly from my colleagues on the Treasury bench. We cannot introduce a congestion charge and say to people, "This is part of an effort to get you out of your car and on to better public transport", unless better public transport is already available. Ultimately, therefore—so that work will be done early, and people will benefit straight away from that work—the Greater London Authority will have to be able to borrow against future income from congestion charging. Providing that we take those approaches, we shall be able to make some progress.

I commend the activities and hard work done by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and the Ministers in his team. They have been subjected to shameful and disreputable attacks, for which most of the attackers should be deeply ashamed.

5.9 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I welcome the conversion of the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) to Liberal Democrat policy on congestion charging and the need to have up-front improvements in public transport before its introduction. However, I hope that he will not object if I do not immediately refer to some of his other comments. I shall come to them later. I very much hope that the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) will shortly catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so that we shall have an opportunity to compare the speeches of two protagonists in the forthcoming battle for the mayoralty of London.

There can be little doubt about the outcome of the battle between the Front Benches today. I was amazed to hear an intervention on the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) from a Conservative Back Bencher who referred to his continuing parliamentary effectiveness. I saw little sign of that during his speech. The Deputy Prime Minister rightly questioned whether it had been worth his while coming back from India. I may not agree with everything that he said, but I agree with his conclusion that it was not worth his while. With the customary generosity that the House affords to hon. Members on both sides, I am sure that we are prepared to acknowledge the current illness of the right hon. Member for Wokingham and put his damp squib of a speech down to it. The Deputy Prime Minister has had a bad press over the past couple of weeks, but many of us expect tomorrow's headlines to read, "Prescott wins on points," or, even more likely, "Redwood saves Prescott's job." I fear that that will be the abiding memory of today's debate.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham's speech was bad not just because of what he said, but for what he did not say. There was not a scintilla of apology or humility in it. Not once did he acknowledge that much of the mess in our transport system is due to the actions of the Conservative Government. The record is clear. In each of the Conservatives' 18 years in office, traffic levels went up, despite the biggest building programme since the Romans. During those 18 years, buses were deregulated and, as a result, the number of people travelling on our buses went down. That correlation is proved by the example of London, where the same deregulation did not take place and the number of people using the buses went up. The Conservatives also presided over the disastrous sale of our railways and the fragmentation of the system into 100 parts. Despite all that we heard from the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), when the Conservatives left office, there was a £1 billion backlog of repair and maintenance work for the tube system.

That was the Conservatives' record. What did they offer for the future? The right hon. Member for Wokingham told us that they were offering bold and innovative ideas—their so-called common-sense revolution. In my book it is not common sense to have policies that will leave motorists in even longer traffic jams. It is not common sense to propose removing traffic calming measures and speed cameras. It is not common sense to suggest that we can build our way out of the current road chaos.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way as I am a little worried about his last sentence. Only yesterday, I presented him with a document from Weymouth and Portland borough council backing the Liberal Democrat county council's bid for a new road in Weymouth. Is he saying that the Liberal Democrats do not want that road? It is certainly the first priority of Liberal Democrat-controlled Dorset county council.

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. If he examines the record, he will see that, for example, I supported the building of a bypass that was much needed to improve the living environment of many of my constituents. I am not aware that the Deputy Prime Minister has suggested that there should be no further road building; the question is whether the main policy for solving the current crisis on our roads is one of continually building more roads or one of a much more selective programme of road building backed by more effective investment in public transport.

In a sense, I was generous to the Deputy Prime Minister when I compared his speech with that of the right hon. Member for Wokingham but I hope that that will not lead him to believe that we consider all that he is offering as sweetness and light. Increasingly, we have come to the view that his grand vision of an efficient, integrated transport system is a mirage. Many people have growing concerns about whether the Labour Government really will be capable of delivering. An opinion poll carried out by NOP was published today, showing that only 13 per cent. of respondents believe that public transport has improved under the Labour Government. Although a further 7 per cent. believe that things may improve in the near future, 51 per cent. believe that, under the Government's current policies, things will never improve.

The problem is that the Government have oversold their policies. Like so many other Departments, DETR has been guilty of over-hyping. The Deputy Prime Minister is not the only one at fault. The Department for Education and Employment promised to reduce class sizes, but it has delivered only for the few; for the many, class sizes are rising.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Labour Government have created 700,000 new jobs, so 700,000 more people are on the move every day? The Government's success in that respect may be ahead of their transport policy, so people's perceptions are wrong. Investment in transport is for the long term and we have every confidence that we shall succeed.

Mr. Foster: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman referred to investment in public transport. In just a few moments I shall return to that subject and link it to the point that he raised.

Many Departments—from the Department of Health making promises about waiting lists, to the Treasury attempting to persuade people that taxes are falling when in fact they are rising, to the Home Office promising 5,000 additional police officers that are unlikely to materialise—have been guilty of over-hyping, and that is leading to significant problems. It is certainly true in respect of DETR. We need only a few specific examples to illustrate that. In terms of rail funding, for example, almost every commentator now accepts that there needs to be a significant increase in investment in our railways if we are to meet the expected rise in the number of passengers and bring about general improvements, particularly in safety. Yet, under their current proposals, the Government's subsidies to our railways are set to fall significantly—by somewhere in the region of £900 million. Given the Deputy Prime Minister's new-found enthusiasm for hypothecation, the real question is what will now happen to that £900 million saving. Can we at least have an assurance that the money will go into improving at least some other aspect of public transport, or will it simply end up in Treasury coffers?

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): The hon. Gentleman seems to forget about the other moneys going into the railways. Does he accept that Virgin is putting in £1 billion for 55 new tilting trains for the west coast main line? My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said that Railtrack had signed up for £800 million already, and will have to spend billions more. The commitment is there to upgrade the west coast main line.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman misses the key point that the Deputy Prime Minister made earlier. The right hon. Gentleman sought to take credit for the fact that, when road pricing is introduced, there would be "additionality"—additional money coming into the overall system. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there will be increased investment from the private sector. No one could deny that, or say that it is not welcome. However, the figures in the Red Book from the Government's own comprehensive spending review say that, while private sector investment will be increasing, the Government's contribution to public transport is falling—despite what the Prime Minister said during Prime Minister's questions today.

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman refers to subsidies in contracts that are presently being renegotiated. He knows that the seven-year franchises were too short to guarantee investment—that has been the complaint by the industry. We are renegotiating the franchises. Companies will receive a great deal more income from a 15 per cent. increase in traffic, and will take a longer view of rail investment. The question of how much the state gives—or of the savings achieved—is a matters for the negotiations.

Mr. Foster: I am glad to hear what the Deputy Prime Minister says. There is considerable confusion over how much money the Government will put in as a result of the outcome of the renegotiations of the franchises. If the right hon. Gentleman is now saying that there is a real possibility that Government investment will significantly increase, to be matched by increased investment from the private

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sector, at least we will begin to see light at the end of the tunnel, with the possibility that the huge gap in funding that every commentator has identified may be filled.

Mr. Prescott: The subsidy to which the hon. Gentleman refers is a revenue subsidy, not a capital subsidy. The fact that we will get more investment does not mean that the Government have to give any more money. The gap may be made up by the growth in the numbers of passengers on the railways. That is an issue for negotiation—it is not to do with investment.

Mr. Foster: The Deputy Prime Minister has seen the figures. Certainly, he will have seen that all of the indications from the BBC programmes last week—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman laughs, yet he was seen on television accepting that, in orders of magnitude, the figures were of the right order. That is crucial. There is a huge gap, and there is considerable confusion in the Government over where we are going with this.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Is my hon. Friend aware that, under an early privatisation, ferries within England—and certainly those to the Isle of Wight—did not receive any subsidy? If a franchise is long enough, investments can be made and an efficient service provided. However, that results in having probably the most expensive ferry crossing in the world in distance travelled for each pound in charges. Is there not a fear that, if the Government adopt a hands-off approach on rail travel, we may have an efficient railway system that no one will be able to afford to use?

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend makes his point in his own eloquent way. However, to suggest that the Deputy Prime Minister will adopt a hands-off approach is perhaps taking matters a little far.

I was suggesting that there has been an element of over-hype by the Government, and I sought to give one example. Another example—in a smaller, but important, area—is pensioner bus passes. In July 1998, we were told by the Government that pensioners could expect Government-funded subsidies for travel. Despite all the credit the Government have sought to claim for that, they made it clear in a parliamentary written answer I received today that that money will not be forthcoming until 2001-02. That is another example of over-hyping.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Deputy Prime Minister once again illustrated how wrong he is when he suggested that increased revenue would come from increased passenger usage? He fails to understand that increased passenger usage will not materialise until there is a service that people want to use. That will happen only when the Government are prepared to put their money where their mouth is.

Mr. Prescott: That is happening now.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Sedentary comments, even from Government Front Benchers, do not help.

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend makes his point well. Other areas of concern include the direction of the Labour party. Before the general election, Labour made it clear that our airspace was not for sale, but now it has made a U-turn and proposed the privatisation of NATS. On road traffic reduction, we all remember the Deputy Prime Minister saying that he would have failed if, in five years, there were not many more people using public transport and far fewer journeys by car. He urged us to hold him to that, but only last week, at the motoring summit, he said:

"I have never thought that a national year on year reduction in traffic is possible in the real world."

Mr. Prescott: In traffic movements.

Mr. Foster: The right hon. Gentleman acknowledges that he has changed his position, but that has led to much confusion. As I said earlier, there is confusion about the Government's stance on Government funding of public transport. Only today in this Chamber, we heard the Prime Minister claim that the Government were investing more in public transport, but that simply is not the case. Over the five-year period of the comprehensive spending review—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman may wave his figures at me, but I got mine from the Library and I hope that he will not challenge them. They are from the Red Book and they demonstrate that the Government will spend £270 million less on public transport during the five-year period than was spent under the previous Administration.

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: No, because I want to make some progress and many other hon. Members wish to speak.

My other concern is the way in which Government policies sometimes appear to be made for the wrong reason. Much has been made of the decision not to go ahead with Railtrack in the proposals for the tube. I am concerned that—whatever the rights and wrongs of the issue—the reason for that decision was purely political. The evidence is clear. On 19 June, the Deputy Prime Minister first announced a possible partnership between the Government and Railtrack. On 30 September—and only then—heads of agreement were signed by the two parties. Those heads of agreement made it clear that the deadline for Railtrack's submission was January 2000. On 8 November, the hon. Member for Brent, East launched his attack on the Government's policies for the tube. On 16 November, an ICM poll showed that the hon. Gentleman was way ahead of all the other candidates. On 19 November the Labour party allowed the hon. Gentleman on to the shortlist, despite all the criticisms he had made of Railtrack's involvement. Although Railtrack was not required to submit its proposal until the end of January, on 22 November, the Government suggested that the Railtrack deal might not be certain. Then, on 30 November, it was ditched by the Government.

Mr. Prescott: This is an important point. When the heads of agreement were signed, one of them was that there should be integration east and west, and north and south. I received a letter from the Strategic Rail Authority, which is handling matters of integration, informing me that it would not be possible to conclude a deal east and west from Paddington. I had told Railtrack that it could have an exclusive contract if it could provide me with the

integration plans. It could not do that: in those circumstances, I ended the agreement and put it out to open contract.

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to the Deputy Prime Minister, who has pointed out that the Strategic Rail Authority advised him that the integration was not possible. However, the reality is that Railtrack was not due to bring forward a proposal—

Mr. Prescott *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Foster: If the right hon. Gentleman is going to intervene, I hope that he will state that he was told categorically by Railtrack, before the date that I have specified, that it was incapable of delivering the programme.

Mr. Prescott: Yes, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that Railtrack informed me the next day that it was not able to carry out the contract for the integration with the Paddington link in the way that it had suggested. It proposed a two-stage deal, which I did not consider acceptable as it went against what I had agreed. That is why I took the action that I did. Both Railtrack and the Strategic Rail Authority agreed that the contract could not be completed to that timetable.

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for putting that clear statement on the record. However, as I said earlier, it is clear to me that the opportunity for Railtrack to see what it could do extended until the end of January. I do not know whether the company would have been able to deliver on the contract, but I am left with the belief that party politics played a large role in the decision, especially in respect of the hon. Member for Brent, East.

Mr. Jenkin: I think that I can help the hon. Gentleman with this. Railtrack would have been perfectly capable of completing the private finance initiative arrangements for the whole of the sub-surface of the tube and for the north-south integration project. The east-west integration was a relatively minor part of the scheme, and the Deputy Prime Minister used it as an excuse to drop Railtrack like a hot brick.

Mr. Prescott: East-west integration was a major part of the scheme.

Mr. Foster: I may not agree with everything that the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) said about transport, and I do not even agree with his proposals for solving the problems of the tube, but, when it comes to an analysis of what has happened, he and I are as one.

Mr. Prescott: You are both wrong.

Mr. Foster: It is clear that the Government have over-hyped what they are capable of doing to improve public transport and solve this country's transport problems. In that respect, they have failed the country. We cannot therefore support the Government's amendment.

Equally, however, we are extremely disappointed that Conservative Members have not offered an ounce of admission that the previous Government were responsible for the vast majority of the current problems. As a result, we shall go into the Lobby and vote against both the motion and the amendment.

5.33 pm

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): The House of Commons is an amazing place. At 3.30 this afternoon, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister was under siege. An hour and a half later, he has triumphed in the House and the whole agenda has changed.

The future role of my right hon. Friend started out as the subject under discussion, but now it is the question of leadership challenges in the Conservative party. Will the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) be a challenger some time in the future? On today's performance, I think not, so perhaps it will be the retread who has just returned to the House, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo). In addition, there is the side issue among Labour Members of who will be our mayoral candidate.

In a sense, it is almost a pity to go back to the opening speech, about which I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). The right hon. Member for Wokingham displayed bare-faced cheek in coming to the House and making no apology for the 18 years under the previous Conservative Government during which problems got worse, and in offering no policy proposals for the future.

What exactly happened during those 18 years? I shall deal first with bus deregulation. Before that, in almost everywhere in my constituency a bus ran until at least 10 o'clock at night, and often later. Pensioners come to me now worried that they will have to give up their driving licences because they are too old to drive a car safely. They say to me, "What can we do? The last bus back to the estate is at 8 o'clock at night. There is no regular service back." For many of those pensioners, bus deregulation destroyed public transport

Mr. Ivan Henderson (Harwich): Has my hon. Friend been told by his constituents how pleased they are with the Government's investment in rural transport? In my area, 130,000 passenger journeys have been made on the Essex village link since the Government invested that money. One customer commented:

"It would seem that these buses are used by regulars. People who would otherwise be housebound have a new dimension for enjoyment. I shall use it again (and probably again)".

I have one more quote.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think not.

Mr. Bennett: I certainly appreciate my hon. Friend's comments. It would be unfair of me to claim that a large part of Denton and Reddish has rural bus services. The point is that many people are not able to drive, because they are too old, too young or disabled. They have to rely on the buses, and the bus service was destroyed by deregulation.

The previous Government claimed that the bus services in Manchester needed more competition, leading to the privatisation of the old municipal services. There is no more competition now than there was before, but we have

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a far worse service. Wage rates for drivers have been substantially reduced, there are some driver shortages and buses do not always turn up.

As for rail privatisation, one has only to stand on Stockport station to see six different rail companies jostling to get their trains on to platform 2. If a train is a couple of minutes late, the situation snowballs. People want to know where the blame lies, but it is extremely difficult to apportion blame.

The previous Government promised that the new Swanwick centre for National Air Traffic Services would be up and running first one year, then the next, and then the next. They never gave the management the opportunity to make it work. The way in which that contract was left was a tragedy. There was no guarantee under the previous Government that, if a project went wrong, the contractor, rather than the public, would meet the cost. The Jubilee line is another example.

I want to refer to the positive aspects of transport. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, in arguing strongly for a new Department, recognised a major fault in that the previous Government did not join up pollution, planning and transport. They all go together so any problems must be dealt with across the board, not piecemeal. Of course, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is big, and doing that is difficult. I sit on the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs and, although I appreciate the extent of the Department's problems, I also appreciate the extent of my right hon. Friend's success.

When the Labour party came to office, the failure of the water companies was an issue. Leakage was a problem, as was the amount of water unnecessarily flushed down the toilet. Huge amounts of sewage were dumped in the sea and on land. My right hon. Friend got the water companies together and laid down the law. The leakage rate reduced dramatically and water conservation has improved marvellously. My right hon. Friend also got on to the regulator and achieved an environmental settlement and a price cut for consumers. Our water supply and sewage treatment will be first class, something that is long overdue. When they privatised the water industry the previous Government claimed that we would enjoy those benefits, but all that happened was that profits were ripped off.

My right hon. Friend went to Kyoto and fought vigorously for an agreement. I accept that there is a long way to go, and from his opening remarks it seems that it is a question of persuading many developing countries, as well as countries such as the United States, to go along with such an agreement. However, at least he has pushed the agenda along so that people are now talking about those issues. He can take a great deal of credit for raising that issue at home and around the world.

Little things can make a tremendous difference. Local authorities were being crippled by compulsory competitive tendering, so my right hon. Friend has pushed through a best value regime, which will soon be in legislation and which will make a great difference to many things that ordinary people take for granted.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's praise for the Secretary of State; I am sure that his job will soon be in the post. Yesterday, I met people from Westminster who are concerned about a planning application to floodlight the Labour party headquarters at Millbank tower. That sounds very un-Kyoto to me. Can the hon. Gentleman influence the Labour party to stop that happening?

Mr. Bennett: Personally, I would say no to the proposal, but some people like a lot of floodlighting. That is not really the key issue before us. It would make a minuscule difference—the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues could do more just by turning off one or two lights at home.

I was disappointed to hear the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea complain about leasehold. Plainly, he has not read the Queen's Speech. As I look at the Ministers on the Government Front Bench, I feel some sympathy for them because they will spend so much time in Committee dealing with Bills that were announced in the Queen's Speech—and the one on leasehold reform is another triumph.

Having praised my right hon. Friend—justifiably; I would praise him only if he came up with the goods—I have to turn to Greater Manchester's metro system. The Prime Minister was in the north on Monday, and I thought it a little unfair that the Deputy Prime Minister could not be there to drive the tram out of Piccadilly and up to Salford. However, another part of the system—the third—is now in place, and we have planning approval for the other eight lines required in the area. The local authorities are committed, and work-based parking charges of about 49p per space could raise the revenue to pay for the system. All we need is the Government's approval. That would make it easier for people to leave their cars at home and journey across Manchester.

I plead only that we should get such schemes off the ground soon, although I know that solving transport problems cannot be done quickly. I can say "Well done" to my right hon. Friend after an excellent two and a half years, but, by the time the next election comes, we in Greater Manchester would like to see some bulldozers moving earth and the imminent arrival of a 10-line tram network in the conurbation.

5.43 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I am always interested by speeches from the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett), which tend to be off-beat and interesting. However, if he thought that the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions had a triumph today, I should like to know what he would judge to be a failure. The Secretary of State's speech was, as ever, muddled, and he failed to answer the serious questions. He is good at the knockabout and he can thump the table, but when it came to serious questions from Front-Bench or Back-Bench Members, he was woefully lacking.

As we approach the end of the millennium, there is no doubt that London is the centre of Europe, a city and a capital of which we can be proud. All eyes will be on projects such as the dome, the London eye, the Croydon tram link and the Jubilee line extension. We are right to be proud of those projects, but my hon. Friends and I are proud of the fact that they were instigated by a Conservative Government—a Conservative Government had the vision to promote them. We are nervous lest the Labour Government mess them up.

Under the surface, all is not well. There is no doubt that the tube is suffering—all parties agree about that. Parts of the tube are excellent, but parts of it are squalid. Escalators are static; stations are grubby and squalid. For many people, tube travel is the nastiest of activities. The London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in a note that was widely circulated, stated that

"passengers have had to endure a year of misery with strikes, line closures, escalator failures and summer temperatures that are so high that to carry livestock would be illegal."

That is what London's commuters have to put up with but, in response, the Government can only blame the previous Conservative Government. However, the Government cannot get away from the fact that breakdowns and delays are getting worse on the underground, and investment is down.

Speaker after speaker—including the Minister for Housing and Planning, when we both served on the Committee considering the Greater London Authority Bill earlier in the year—has pointed out that investment has risen under the Labour Government. However, we have only to read the figures for total investment expenditure during the 10 years until 1997, given in the evidence of London Transport to the Transport Sub-Committee, to realise that the average amount per annum in cash terms, without adjustment for inflation, was £700 million. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) said that, viewed from any angle, it was clear that investment in the underground has gone down under the Government.

When Labour Back Benchers grab their research department briefings, they refer to the Conservative spending planned beyond 1997 as proof that expenditure would have gone down. However, they know that, in addition to those projected figures, we would have invested the proceeds of the privatisation of London underground. That would have made up the shortfall and would have kept the figures high—way above anything proposed by the Labour Government.

There is no doubt that more investment is needed in the underground, as the Deputy Prime Minister pointed out today. However, we also need action. The Government give us words, words, words—but no action. After the general election, the early talk was of swift action on the underground. In June 1997, during an Opposition Day debate, the then Minister of Transport, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang), tabled an amendment applauding the Government's

"swift action on options for public-private partnerships to improve the Underground".

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the financial advisers who had been retained to advise the Government on PPP. He said that

"we shall be using them for only a few months".—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 869.]

The Government thought that they would crack the problem in a few months. The swift action has been nothing but talk.

However, the Deputy Prime Minister began to get the message. During Second Reading of the Greater London Authority Act 1999, he said that he would not be rushed. Today, he told us that there was no quick fix and that he would take his time. That is probably the only pledge on London underground that he has been able to keep.

Mr. Gray: Is my hon. Friend aware that "Consensus for Change", the Labour party's pre-election manifesto document stated that a Labour Government would bring "immediate benefits" to the travelling public? In that context, is he aware that the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions plans to announce a 10-year plan for the improvement of transport? Does that not demonstrate that the Government are well aware that they cannot provide immediate benefits to the travelling public?

Mr. Ottaway: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. The Government say one thing and do another in all policy matters.

The delay in dealing with the underground has now become a scandal. It is clear that no public-private partnership will be ready when the mayor takes office in July 2000 after his two-month period of grace following the election.

During the Secretary of State's time in office, there has been the debacle of Railtrack being excluded from the bidding process for the underground. It is being unfairly blamed before the inquiries into the Paddington crash have been properly completed but, at the same time, the Government think that it is good enough to run the channel tunnel rail link; they are happy to take its money when it suits them. However, under pressure from the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), the Government have backed down on Railtrack's involvement in the public-private partnership for the underground. The resulting delay will add hugely to the burden of the new mayor. He will have a big enough job as it is, because the Government have raised expectations about his role to such a level that the Archangel Gabriel himself would not be able to meet them. They do absolutely nothing to assist.

What a mess the Government are getting into over future funding. The Liberal Democrats and the hon. Member for Brent, East want a wholly publicly run London underground backed by bonds; the Government want a partial privatisation; and Conservative Members want a whole privatisation. The Liberal Democrats and the Government miss the essential point that a pound is a pound, whether it comes from the bank, a bond or the Treasury. The important decision is how that money is managed when managers have their hands on it. What counts is how it is spent.

The Government admit that the present management of the London Underground is not up to it. At Prime Minister's Question Time last week, the Prime Minister said that one needed private sector involvement in running the underground. Today, the Deputy Prime Minister described the Jubilee line contract as crazy, but who entered into that contract? The present management of London Underground negotiated it. That is why Bechtel had to be brought in; the present management of London Underground were simply not up to the job. We all know that the Croydon tramlink is a completely private sector project.

The Government advocate a system that will retain the very managers who run London Underground, so that they will continue to run it. The very weakness of London Underground—the people who will not stand up to the Spanish practices of the trade unions—is the present management. It is nuts for the Liberal Democrats, the Government and the hon. Member for Brent, East to argue that those managers are the right people to take the underground into the future.

[Mr. Ottaway]

Such proposals will not work, and commentators have rightly condemned the plans. Simon Jenkins, who is no fool when it comes to talking about London, wrote in the *Evening Standard* that the Government

"should privatise by simply floating the Tube, lock, stock and barrel, on the Stock Market . . . flotation as a single business is better than hacking the tube system up, down and sideways merely to appease some slaves to outdated ideology."

I could not put it better myself.

The Economist also knows what it is talking about. It said:

"The government's plans for the London Underground make no sense . . . Labour's self-financing plan for renewing the capital's crumbling tube network is seriously flawed."

Such commentators are not foolish, so it is high time that the Government recognised that their plans are flawed. They should respond to what everyone outside the bunker in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions says.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): The hon. Gentleman quoted with approval the article in the *Evening Standard* that said that the tube should be privatised "lock, stock and barrel". Does he also agree that the people who would subsequently have control of the tube could do exactly what they like with fares?

Mr. Ottaway: I do not think that that is so. The mayor will integrate with the new privatised sector. I have no doubt that the success of every privatisation is largely dependent on the role of the regulator. The mayor could be the regulator in the Conservative party's proposals.

The public-private partnership will be a ball and chain around the ankle of the new mayor of London. It was interesting that, when I asked the Deputy Prime Minister whether the operating profit would cover the costs and the investment of the PPP, he said that he would answer that question, but did not do so. I am pretty sure that the PPP will not cover all the costs of the London Underground, so I hope that any future mayor of London will send the bill to the Government.

There is no doubt that all tube and public tramway systems need subsidy. That is why, when we announced our privatisation policy, we said that the proceeds from the sale would be reinvested as our subsidy. I have to tell the Liberal Democrats and the hon. Member for Brent, East that the principle behind the idea of bonds is distinctly flawed. In New York, on top of the sums raised by the bonds, there has had to be a government subsidy of $1.7 billion in just the past year.

I ask the Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), who has responsibility for transport in London, to answer the question that I put to the Deputy Prime Minister. When the PPP is in place, will the operating profit cover the cost and the investment, or will subsidies still be necessary in addition to the PPP?

Where is the vision for the London underground? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said in his excellent second maiden speech, the previous Government had the vision to introduce the docklands light railway, the Jubilee line extension, the Croydon tramlink, modernisation of the east London line, Thameslink 2000, the Paddington express and the link to Stansted. That was the vision of a Government who know where they were going on transport policy. Passenger numbers on public transport systems are now up by 20 per cent. but no increase in capacity is planned.

Fares are increasing, there is more overcrowding and public transport is less reliable. The right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) is not in the Chamber now, but his proposal for an outer Circle line sounds great. However, where will the money come from to pay for it? If God forbid, the right hon. Gentleman becomes the next mayor of London, he will not have the money to build an outer Circle line around London. That is more talk from the Labour party, without any action. The public will know where the blame lies.

Mr. Geraint Davies: I wish to make two points. First, will not the Croydon tramlink, which will not be a radial line, be a test of whether PPP can survive in the private sector and fund some of the link? Secondly, under the Conservative party's privatisation plan, if the people running the tube could not make a profit unless they jacked up fares beyond what the mayor would allow, how would the hon. Gentleman solve that problem?

Mr. Ottaway: The hon. Gentleman represents a neighbouring constituency to mine, so I shall not be too tough on him. However, I would have thought that he knew that the Croydon tramlink is not a PPP; it is a private finance initiative built by the private sector and it will be run by the private sector. It will have no public sector involvement whatever. The previous Government had the vision to introduce it—

Mr. Davies *rose—*

Mr. Ottaway: I shall not give way again. About £200 million have gone into the project, of which £140 million came from the previous Government and £60 million came from the private sector. However, there will be no public sector involvement in the management of the project.

The Government seem to think that congestion charging is the answer to the traffic problems that face London. The Deputy Prime Minister referred to a Green Paper, which was produced in the mid-1990s and said that there was a presumption that congestion charging would be introduced. All presumptions are rebuttable. If the right hon. Gentleman did not know, a Green Paper is a consultation document. That proposal did not appear in any manifesto or White Paper published by the previous Conservative Government.

I have no doubt that the reduction of congestion is a desirable objective, but I am not convinced that it is achievable. I certainly am convinced that a congestion tax is not the answer. The problem is that people like using their cars. Ministers will be well aware of the pilot schemes that have been carried out to find out how effective a congestion tax will be, and they know that, in London, it will take charges of £8 to £10 to deter someone from making a trip.

If, for example, the borough of Croydon were to introduce a congestion tax, all the shoppers would boycott Croydon and go to Bluewater, which has just opened

down the road and which has free parking. I am well aware that the Croydon chamber of commerce is most concerned about Labour-controlled Croydon council's proposals to introduce a congestion charge.

Mr. Davies *rose—*

Mr. Ottaway: I will not give way.

The problem with the congestion charge is that it discriminates against the mother who is going to collect her children from school, the nurse on her way to night duty and the elderly and disabled who want to use their car to get to the shops. It is, in effect, a stealth tax, and it is not an effective way to tackle congestion.

The people who will be most affected by a congestion tax are those on low incomes, and that proposal comes from a Labour Government. We must question the very point of the Labour party when a Labour Government are introducing a flat tax that will hit those on low incomes the hardest. It is ironic that it should be left to one-nation Conservatives to defend such people from the Labour party. When that happens, it is a sure sign that the Government have lost touch with the people who elected them in the first place.

6.1 pm

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): If anything demonstrates that the Conservative party has lost touch with reality, it is the speech of the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway). This is the only legislature in the world that would be having the sort of debate that we are having today. In sensible, grown-up democracies, the argument for a decent public transport system is irrefutable, and in other parts of the world even right-wing parties like the Conservative party accept the necessity for decent basic public transport. Instead, we got the usual tirade.

I shall not comment on the speech by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), because I think that private grief is best left private, but the hon. Member for Croydon, South had to pursue the argument that the congestion charge is an attack on the lowest paid. I have to tell him that the lowest earners do not drive motor cars, so, whatever happens with congestion charges, they will not usually be the people who have to pay them. I agree with colleagues who have said that, before we can introduce congestion charges, we have to make sure that there is proper public transport provision, particularly in our towns and cities.

There are those who advocate freezing or reducing tube fares. I shall make only one comment about the tube. As someone who has lived in London during at least part of the week for a quarter of a century, I hope that, if tube fares are reduced or frozen, someone will tell us how the extra passengers are to be carried because, in my experience, there is not much spare capacity. Until long-term improvements to the tube are carried out, the congestion that we see every day, for most of the day, on London's tube service will continue regardless of the level of fares.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is up to local authorities to decide whether congestion charging is appropriate for their area? We are handing back the power to local authorities to make those decisions, and to do so on the basis of what works in their area. My hon. Friend referred to people who do not have access to a car and, in areas such as mine, where 40 per cent. of the population do not have access to a car, people need improvements to public transport so that they can travel to work and get about.

Mr. Snape: Yes, I could not agree more.

The hon. Member for Croydon, South said that the Bluewater development would have an enormous impact on Croydon if congestion charges were introduced. Obviously, I do not know that part of the world as well as the hon. Gentleman does, but I would hazard a guess that the Bluewater development will have a pretty significant impact on shopping in Croydon regardless of congestion charges. There are no congestion charges in the west midlands, but the Merry Hill shopping complex has wreaked havoc in many of the small towns in the immediate area. Such out-of-town shopping areas, as approved by the previous Government—Merry Hill is, incidentally, part of an enterprise zone—have an impact well before we start even to talk about implementing congestion charging. The hon. Gentleman should not, therefore, pursue that argument.

There is no point in Members on opposite sides of the House blaming each other for the situation in which we now find ourselves. Nobody seriously thinks that two and a half years into a Labour Government, some of the major transport construction schemes that are needed could have been carried out already. Let me make it plain—many of the congestion problems that have arisen in the past 20 years would have come about regardless of the political hue of the Government of the day, because, as people become more affluent, they travel more. There are more cars on our roads. There were more cars on the road by the end of the nearly 20 years that the Conservatives were in office, and a few more have been added to that total since 1 May 1997. All that will have an impact on congestion.

Some of my colleagues apparently believe that the privatisation of the railway industry can somehow be reversed, but I do not think that it can. None of us would have started from this particular point, but this is the point that we are at.

I was interested to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) talk about the number of different rail companies whose trains want to enter Stockport and the delays that they cause. I hope that he is not for a moment suggesting that my former colleagues in the signal box should let them all into the platform at the same time. *[Interruption.]* I shall give way to him in a moment if he likes. As an occasional, if unofficial, visitor to that signal box, I have to tell him that there are many more passenger trains going through Stockport than when I worked there. There are far fewer freight trains but, as they say, there are swings and roundabouts.

We should be trying to get investment into the railway industry from any source. I find it fascinating that the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), talked about the need for the Government to pump in more money. He appeared to be suggesting that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister should tear up the agreement with franchisees—who freely negotiated rail franchises, knowing full well that the

[Mr. Snape]

amount of subsidy would decline year by year—and give them the money anyway. That might be the Liberals' idea of a sensible way to use resources.

Mr. Brake *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Snape: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but that is exactly what his hon. Friend advocated in his speech, which was far too long, although it was reasonably interesting.

Mr. Ian Bruce: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I know that it is not for you to remind colleagues about when they should make a declaration of interest but, on a general point, if an hon. Member has clearly declared that he is the director of a transport company, is it appropriate that he should remind the House of his pecuniary interest in that industry at the beginning of his speech?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I hope that all hon. Members will remember their obligations in that regard.

Mr. Snape: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I should have declared an interest at the beginning of my speech. I am of course a chairman of Britain's biggest urban bus company, which is part of the National Express Group, and I am a member of the RMT. I chose to start my speech by referring to the speech made by the hon. Member for Croydon, South, but I should perhaps have declared my interest first.

That point of order, however, is the usual cheap shot from the Conservative party. I would have got round to declaring my interest eventually, as I always do, for the simple reason that it is far too easy to point the finger. If the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) is ever clever enough to be appointed to a similar post, I will be the first to congratulate him but, given his usual performance in the Chamber, that is pretty unlikely, and let me make it plain that I myself would not give him a job.

I return to the 20 years of Toryism. During that period, the proportion of freight carried on our congested roads grew by 66 per cent. I am not blaming anybody for that; it happens to be a fact. Yet, in two and a half years, there has already been a substantial increase in rail freight carried by English, Welsh and Scottish Railway. I think—I hope that I carry the House on this point—that the increase is largely due to the encouragement that the rail freight industry is getting from the Government.

I hope that my Front-Bench colleagues will bear it in mind that the road haulage industry will continue to press for bigger, heavier lorries in the United Kingdom, and that those lorries impact directly on rail freight. Incidentally, I do not have any interest in rail freight to declare, other than my membership of a railway union, but I hope that most of us who care about such matters are pleased about the increase in rail freight and want the trend to continue in the near future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish mentioned bus deregulation and the patchy service in the Manchester area. That is true of some parts of the country, but in other parts a great deal of investment is going into the bus industry. In arranging the bus summit a couple of weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister did his best to encourage the bus industry generally to invest money in new vehicles so that we can make bus travel more attractive than it is at present. Of course, that needs extra support from local authorities. I hasten to tell the Liberals that that is not financial support. It involves not a greater subsidy from local authorities but the provision of bus priority measures and the enforcement of those measures to prevent, for example, lorries being loaded and unloaded in bus lanes, or drivers taking short cuts in bus lanes when the rest of us—I drive a car—are waiting at traffic lights.

In London, the *Evening Standard* has been extraordinarily supportive of public transport, for example by running a campaign against those who block bus lanes. Alas, the reverse is true in the west midlands, where the main regional morning newspaper, *The Birmingham Post* carries out what I can only describe as an hysterical campaign against any sort of bus priority provision. It regularly carries articles attacking the company of which I am chairman and other bus companies in the west midlands. At least there has been a change of editor. The previous editor left to be the Conservative candidate at Edgbaston. Given his far-right views, he would be quite at home in the present-day Conservative party. I wish that *The Birmingham Post* would emulate the *Evening Standard* and be rather more supportive of what those who work in the bus industry are trying to do to attract passengers back to buses.

Make no mistake about it, the bus will be the major people mover outside London. The west midlands are not fortunate enough to have a tube system. However, we have a fairly short metro system, which runs from Wolverhampton to Birmingham through my constituency. Before the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) consults the "Register of Members' Interests" again, let me tell the House that the company of which I am chair has the operating contract to run the system. It is not a publicly owned system. Travel Midland Metro, a subsidiary of a company of which I am chair, operates it.

We would like to see the system extended. One of the problems with light railway systems is that they are chronically expensive when compared to alternative systems. Where there are steel wheels on steel rails, every safety precaution must be built in. No one, not even ex-railway men, felt the consequences of the Paddington accident more than I did. However, there are three Paddingtons on our roads every week, and people apparently accept that. We have a drive-on-sight tram system for much of the Midland metro route between Birmingham and Wolverhampton. As there is a short stretch of single line into Snow Hill station, all the trams are equipped with automatic train protection. That makes them even more expensive than they are to start with.

If we are to have belt-and-braces safety procedures whenever we try to open a light rail line, our friends in the Treasury, under any Government, will say that, on the basis of straight comparisons, that is not an economic way of moving people around. Our friends in the Treasury, regardless of a Government's political hue, have watched transport expenditure with enormous care and diligence over the years. Some of us might feel that they have exercised too much care and diligence. However, getting money for public transport projects, particularly railway projects when the railway was in the public sector, was never an easy task.

I have bored the House with this before but I shall bore it again by pointing out to hon. Members that they can still see Edgeley junction No. 2 signal box just outside Stockport when they take a train to Manchester. Although many promises have been made by various Governments, the Treasury has never found the money to modernise signalling along that stretch of line. There are still Victorian signal boxes from Cheadle Hulme to Heaton Norris junction. That is great for the guys who work in them because they are labour intensive. However, signal boxes built in the 1880s surely do not have any part to play in signalling trains in the last few weeks of the 20th century.

I am told that modernisation will take place in July next year. I will believe that when I see it. As was once said, we used to have a press conference every other week under the Conservative Government to announce the modernisation of the west coast main line. At last, however, investment cash is going into that line, including the stretch through Birmingham and the west midlands and that towards Manchester.

I must tell my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), who intervened earlier, that Virgin trains is very good at talking up what it is doing. I must correct my hon. Friend because it is not spending £1 billion on tilting trains. The trains are worth £1 billion, but Mr. Branson is leasing them.

Mr. Martlew: Angel Trains.

Mr. Snape: That is slightly different. I am not being pedantic, but claims are made about the amount of money that is being spent on railway modernisation that are not always justified. The trains in question are extremely expensive. We have been to see them, and very good they are, too. They will be leased by Virgin trains and it is to be hoped that they will provide a better service for my hon. Friend's constituents and for mine. Many years have passed and it is still taking a great deal of time to bring the line up to the standard that we expect and would demand. It was regarded as the premier line.

I have detained the House long enough. However, if we are to have a grown-up debate on transport, the Conservative party must move part of the way. We cannot have an Opposition Front-Bench team who say, "We shall sweep away the paraphernalia of traffic cameras, road safety procedures and traffic lights", as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said. One of his predecessors, Nicholas Ridley, used to say the same. I had a great deal of time for him. We secondary modern boys and old Etonians always get on well because we all had deprived childhoods. However, I did not agree with him on sweeping away controls. I certainly cannot agree with the right hon. Member for Wokingham, the Opposition transport spokesman, that switching off traffic lights and removing street furniture will suddenly lead to traffic flowing far more quickly. The Conservative party must grow up. It can start by changing its transport spokesman.

Mr. Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Snape: I will not give way because I am about to resume my place.

If the Conservative party changed its transport spokesman, and perhaps gave the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) a job, it would at least do no worse than at present.

6.17 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): I instinctively warm to colleagues who do not forget their roots. It was endearing of the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) to remind us of his early days in the signal box. Perhaps the best part of the Deputy Prime Minister's speech was when he was harking back to his early days before the mast with P&O and talking about his achievements for the shipping industry. I applaud that. It has to be said that the new tax regime is better; it is to the good of the country. As for the rest of his speech, it was rather like the earth before the creation, being without form and void. It was a flat earth at that. To be candid, we were given very little information about how the integrated transport strategy will work.

I have been sceptical for many a month about the merits of a London mayor, as I think probably two thirds of Londoners have been, inasmuch as they did not bother to vote in the referendum. However, having heard the right hon. Gentleman's speech on transport, I have become a convert. The role of the mayor in putting London's transport to rights has perhaps been fully vindicated. The right hon. Gentleman's transport strategy has not improved the lot of the travelling public in our capital.

I appreciated too—I must be more generous—the fact that the right hon. Gentleman has come back from India. He foreshortened his passage to the sub-continent and returned to the Dispatch Box. Obviously, his time out east had some influence on him—he said that climate change is the big picture for transport. That may be so for the right hon. Gentleman, having flown back from the Himalayas, but for my constituents who are strap-hanging their way into London along the Metropolitan line in sweaty, steamy, heaving, smelly carriages which are typical of the underground today, the picture is very different. It may not be the big picture, but it is a real and unpleasant picture. They have to endure purgatorial conditions that are unjustifiable and unnecessary.

My constituents are served by no fewer than eight tube stations and three tube lines. The London underground system is essential to them, as it is to so many Londoners, to get to work and to fulfil their daily obligations.

In an arresting and welcome second maiden speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) made some telling points. He stressed the importance of quality of life to his constituents. That is crucial to Londoners, and a great many of them do not have a high quality of life, not least because of the misery that they have to endure because of congestion on the roads and the appalling state of London underground.

What makes Londoners' life worth while is their sense of community and of belonging, and the sense of heritage of those communities. I was pleased when my right hon. Friend brought that out in his speech. He made a moving tribute to his predecessor, the late and right hon. Alan Clark. He spoke lightheartedly about Alan's hinterland. I am sure that he was referring to Alan's castle and the land down at Saltwood which he loved so dearly.

The hinterland for central London is, of course, outer London and the ring of the home counties around it, from which so many people commute and to which they return relieved at the end of a long, stressful, tiring day. I was disappointed, therefore, that the Government's amendment to the motion tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), which

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

is—rightly—highly critical of the lack of investment in the tube, was so inadequate and recognised so little the stresses and strains that commuters must endure.

That was the case, too, with the speech of the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). He has overcome his depression at no longer being Secretary of State, but sad to say, he has returned to his characteristically ungenerous and unconvincing self. He had little to offer for the improvement of commuting and the London transport system.

I shall make some simple and straightforward points. The first is that, of course, investment is crucial. The trouble is that we are getting the worst of both worlds. We have not had the public-private partnership. It is stillborn. We do not know when it will come to fruition. Because it has been so long delayed, Londoners are not only suffering inconvenience, congestion and uncomfortable travelling conditions, but are paying an awful lot more for the privilege. Every year, London underground fares go up way above inflation, as they will next year as well.

Furthermore, the Treasury has to pick up the shortfall, to the tune of £517 million over a two-year period. This was not anticipated, because the Government presumed that there would be moneys coming in from the public-private partnership and the sale of the leases for the infrastructure of the tube.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that, if he were mayor of London, which he may be, he would ensure that fares would not rise above inflation, even though, under his scheme, the tube would be privatised? Can he give that guarantee? I do not think so.

Mr. Wilkinson: I can guarantee to provide leadership for London and a sense of direction. The mayor will have, above all, to choose the appropriate team and to put in place a chief executive and board of Transport for London to integrate the city's transport.

The tragedy is that the Government had to announce during the Committee stage of the Greater London Authority Bill that the Transport for London organisation, which is central to their plans to integrate transport in the capital, and rightly so, will not come into being until some undefined date in the future, which they cannot yet specify, even half way through their term of office. It is a monumental failure: a catastrophic failure for Londoners.

With regard to fares, the management of the underground system should be commercial. Appropriate fares should be set at an incentive level to bring in passengers, to get a good return and to provide the revenue stream to generate new rolling stock and to overcome the congestion problems. Without that commercial management, I do not believe that there will be much improvement in conditions for the travelling public on the underground.

I hope that that answers the question from the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies), which was largely answered earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway), who correctly said that the regulator would have a crucial role in ensuring that an appropriate fare level was set.

I was struck by the omissions from the Government amendment. There is no mention of the public-private partnership. Perhaps the Government think that, if they do not mention it, no one will notice that it has not come about. There is no mention of the extra £517 million to which I referred. There is no mention of Transport for London—understandably so, as it does not exist, but it was in their manifesto and all their early speeches. There is no mention of the fare increases that Londoners endure.

Interestingly, there is also no mention of the other burdens that will be placed on the travelling public in London—the road user charges and the workplace parking taxes. For my constituents in outer London, the concept of road user charges is anathema, for two reasons. First, they have to go into central London by car, because public transport is so inadequate. Clearly, public transport must be put right before such charges can be considered. Secondly, the inner circle within which road user charges are to be levied will be a barrier. People will park in outer London to avoid having to pay the impost.

Anyway, a workplace parking tax is a tax on going to work. A mayor who wants to make London the free enterprise capital of the world is not in the business of taxing Londoners more, nor should he be in the business of imposing workplace charges. Employers in London face enough taxation already. Why should they—especially small businesses—face yet another tax?

Mr. Ian Bruce: Has my hon. Friend noticed that analysis of a number of park and ride schemes shows that drivers often drive further before getting on a bus to go into the town centre than they would if they drove directly to a town centre car park? Very often, such schemes do not reduce pollution, even if they occasionally reduce congestion.

Mr. Wilkinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is an expert in these matters. He has brought out new arguments that I would otherwise have overlooked.

The key point about investment is that it will give the opportunity for new lines to be created. For my constituents, that is crucial. Investment need not be substantial. My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), whom I see on the Benches beside me, has long been an advocate, rightly, of extending the Central line from South Ruislip or West Ruislip in my constituency to Uxbridge—a modest increase in the length of the line, which is potentially of considerable benefit to the travelling public from Uxbridge, who could also link on to the Chiltern line and go westwards, beyond West Ruislip.

Another good example is the Croxley link, which would extend the Metropolitan line out to Watford junction, which would be invaluable for people in Northwood and in northern parts of my constituency. A further interesting example is the difficulty of getting from north-west London directly to Heathrow.

Good precedents have been set by the private sector. The Heathrow rail link, which is now in operation and is invaluable, was initiated by the Conservative Government, as has been pointed out. It was financed by British Airports Authority plc, British Airways plc and Railtrack. New links are planned from the airport to the south-east, towards Waterloo. I hope that yet another link will be built—certainly when the fifth terminal comes into operation—to the north-west and west, joining the main west line towards Reading.

If the tube is under commercial management that has flair, vision and a desire to serve London people better, it will have a marketing strategy that is infinitely more imaginative than the present one. I advocate early-bird fares to get people on the network early at a discounted rate, and night-owl fares for people who would otherwise take their cars into London for the theatre, cinema or other entertainment. Those are both imaginative proposals, although I am sure there will be many more.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on initiating this debate. I am glad that the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions came back to this country for it. Even though his speech was a bit of a flat-earth one, it was fun while it lasted. I doubt that he will make many more in his present appointment.

6.31 pm

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): It beggars belief that we should be lectured on the neglect of transport spending and infrastructure by the Conservative party. Over 18 years, with all the money that was coming in from north sea oil, we could have transformed Britain's transport infrastructure into something typical of, say, Germany today. The then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, had a deep antipathy to public transport in virtually all its forms. Let us not forget that, for 11 years as Prime Minister, she maintained a record as a point of principle of never once travelling on a train—no doubt because they are driven by filthy trade unionists.

We also saw delay in the construction of the channel tunnel. Why? Because of Mrs. Thatcher's complete antipathy to the idea of dependence on trains driven by trade unionists. She hung on to the very end to the idea that we should build a bridge instead of a tunnel, until civil servants managed to persuade her that the winds across the channel would blow most cars off such a bridge. We saw a consistent pattern of neglect and often a quite malignant approach to public transport spending.

I regret that we did not have the Transport Bill in the first year of a Labour Government. The trouble was that there were far too many demands, such as for Scottish and Welsh devolution. However, the Bill is on stream now. I am very pleased that the Deputy Prime Minister managed to have stipulated in the Act that established the Greater London Authority powers for the mayor to tackle transport problems in London, including the ability to use the congestion charge, which I, unlike the Conservatives, think is central to the task.

We also know of the tremendous backlog of investment in the London underground. When I heard that retread, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), lecture us on how he wants new tube lines in his constituency, I remembered the fact that, for 20 years, Labour and Conservative Administrations of the Greater London Council trudged over Westminster bridge to try to persuade successive Governments—primarily those of Mrs. Thatcher and her successor—to allow the GLC to extend the Jubilee line to docklands and to build the Chelsea-Hackney link. If the GLC had been given that permission nearly 20 years ago, the Jubilee line extension would have been working for the past decade, and we would most probably have already completed the Chelsea-Hackney tube line, which was of course to go well beyond Chelsea and Hackney.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I know that the hon. Gentleman is a man of great integrity and political honesty. Perhaps he will take the opportunity, while talking about the London underground, to correct the information that the Prime Minister gave earlier in answer to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. The Prime Minister said that his Government have invested more in London underground since they came to office than the previous Conservative Government. Figures from the House of Commons Library show that spending during the last three or four years of the Conservative Administration, as measured against the first two years of this Administration and projected spending for the next two years, was greater. The previous Government invested more in the tube than this one. Will the hon. Gentleman take the opportunity to correct—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Member is making a speech.

Mr. Livingstone: I would love to be able to help the hon. Gentleman, but one of the undertakings that I had to make to get through Labour's vetting panel was never again to criticise the Prime Minister.

As somebody who for five years was leader of the GLC, I remember every year trying to negotiate with the Government for money to modernise the tube and invest, yet, year after year, spending was cut. Some people think that the record of problems stems only from when the GLC was abolished and the Government took over London Transport, but it goes back to the mid-1970s, during which consecutive Governments, dependent on Treasury advice, turned down Labour and Tory GLC Administration proposals for increased investment. We have that problem to resolve.

I give credit to both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister for beginning to mobilise resources. Nobody denies that there is a debate about the best way in which to raise such money—whether it should be through public-private partnership or bonds—but at least we are having the debate. I suspect that it will be concluded soon—certainly if I have anything to do with it, because I am standing for the Labour nomination on a clear commitment to keep the tube in the public sector and raise financing through bonds. I assume that, if I win, that will be the end of the matter.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will my hon. Friend explain why, on Third Reading of the Greater London Authority Bill, he voted against the Liberal Democrat amendment, which would have empowered the mayor to raise bonds for the tube, and for the public-private partnership?

Mr. Livingstone: I did so for exactly the same reason as my hon. Friend tends to vote with the Government: because the Whips told me to. I decided over a long period that one should vote against one's party only when every other avenue has been exhausted. Given that public-private partnership is a meaninglessly wide and vague term that can cover a multitude of sins, it seemed rather pointless to make a great row out of the matter.

[Mr. Livingstone]

I think that the Labour party was wrong; it should have accepted the Liberal Democrat amendment to allow the mayor to raise bonds. I suspect that we shall return to that matter again and again, whoever is mayor.

Mr. Don Foster: Does the hon. Gentleman at least take comfort from the knowledge that the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) only three weeks ago was quoted as saying:

"I would not rule out financing things by bonds for individual projects and schemes"?

Mr. Livingstone: I find that there is virtually no disagreement among the Labour candidates. Any mayor who looks at the need for infrastructure works in London must be attracted to issuing bonds, if only because of the success of the New York system.

Much disinformation has been put about, comparing and confusing the disaster of New York's issuing bonds to pay the wages of teachers at the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s—that could not happen here because it would be illegal for local government to borrow money in any form for revenue spending—and the state of New York's beginning, in 1981, to issue bonds through the metropolitan transit authority in order to transform the underground system.

I can remember everybody in New York telling me in 1978—all tourists were told—not to use the underground because I might never come out again; it was too dangerous and unreliable. At one disastrous point, a third of all rolling stock was out of commission. Now, the New York underground is world class. It has been transformed by the consistent use of bonds, which have raised $14 billion.

Mr. Ottaway: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in addition to bonds—I made this point in my speech—the Metropolitan Transit Authority required a $1.7 billion subsidy? Where does he think such money would come from? Is he saying that the bond issue would still have to be backed by Government subsidy?

Mr. Livingstone: New York's metropolitan transit authority had a sum of money to raise. It raised it in different component parts. It got what it needed from the markets and found the rest through public subsidy. There is nothing to prevent a Labour Government deciding to pay for the modernisation of the tube by issuing bonds and by raising some of the rest from fares—as well as, perhaps, from congestion charges. One would consider all sources of revenue streams in order to raise the total sum. Let us not forget that the metropolitan transit authority has done much more than simply modernise New York's underground.

Mr. Ottaway: Does the hon. Gentleman realise that the Greater London Authority Act does not allow the underground to be subsidised through a congestion charge?

Mr. Livingstone: A series of revenue streams comes into a British local authority—the Greater London Authority is such an authority—and, under British local government law, the first call on the budget of a local authority is the repayment of debt. That is why British local government has such a good credit rating. Even when Derek Hatton ran Liverpool, that local authority never missed a debt payment to the moneylenders. That fact was not regularly spread around Militant at the time, but the authority always paid up. No British local authority has ever defaulted on debt. If the Government did not want the Treasury to raise the bonds, there would be no problem in giving the mayor and the Assembly the power to issue them.

It is bizarre that the debate was intended to censure the Deputy Prime Minister. That was forgotten a couple hours ago in view of Conservative Members' lacklustre performance. There has been much gossip in the press, suggesting a conflict between the Deputy Prime Minister and the policy unit at No. 10. It is said that the Deputy Prime Minister has been scaring the policy wonks with his desire to introduce congestion charging and his pro-public transport policies. In any conflict on those issues between the Deputy Prime Minister and the pinheads in the policy unit, the former has the overwhelming backing of the majority of Labour Members. His commitment to public transport is the first such commitment for 20 years. He will be backed solidly by Labour Members in proceeding with the programme that he has unleashed. We shall do everything possible to encourage it to progress more rapidly.

There has been much disinformation about bonds. I begin with a briefing note for Members of Parliament produced by the Labour party, called "Working for London". It makes several points to try to show that bonds will not work. It states:

"income from fares is simply not sufficient to underwrite the borrowing."

That is nonsense. London Underground currently spends approximately £300 million a year on maintaining the track and improvement works.

When people talk about borrowing £7 billion to catch up with the backlog, they refer to work that is going on from day to day. It includes work that should have been done years ago, as well as work scheduled for the end of the 15-year period. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore) claimed that the markets would not raise £7 billion, but we must remember that that sum is to be spent over 15 years. The whole sum would not be granted at the same time, kept in a piggybank and doled out over 15 years for a maintenance programme. It would be allocated in a series of tranches.

The second point that the document makes is that

"bonds would count as borrowing"

and would reduce the money available for health and education. Yet again, that is an arbitrary decision by the Treasury. In the western world, only this country would consider that an investment programme in the infrastructure of transport should count against the public sector borrowing requirement, or whatever we now call it. That is nonsense, and means that we take a shortsighted approach to the infrastructure work that Britain needs.

I sometimes wonder whether the Treasury is on Britain's side, because it has consistently displayed short-term thinking about the programme of public investment that we need to create a modern society. Yet members of the London business community say that the

worst problem that they face is doing business in a city where roads and public transport are in such a disgraceful state. That is a major hindrance to their ability to make a profit, to employ people and generate wealth. We must start to impose our priorities on the Treasury.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend believe that there should be any limit in principle on borrowing to invest in public sector infrastructure in a given year, or does he believe that there should be no ceiling on it in spite of the need for macro-economic prudence and stability?

Mr. Livingstone: That is the most remarkably stupid question that I have ever been asked, and people have to go some to get that record. Of course, I accept that someone has to set a limit somewhere. We are arguing about where to set it. The Treasury has been unduly restrictive and largely responsible for the parlous state of much of the public sector in Britain. We were originally told that too much public sector investment would squeeze out private sector investment. There is no evidence to sustain that. However, we have been under-investing disgracefully in the public sector for more than 20 years. A huge backlog now exists, and we have to set priorities.

I have a copy of London First's advice, which, I assume, was sent to all Members of Parliament. It mentions a £25 billion programme of investment in transport in London. It points out that that figure would constitute 2.5 per cent. of London's contribution to gross domestic product over a decade. That is achievable, if we decide that it is important. There have been complaints from the business sector, whose members encounter appalling delays week after week when they try to move from a meeting in the City to a meeting in the west end. The business community knows that the state of transport in London is a major disincentive to people to stay in London and to new work and wealth creation in London. Getting transport infrastructure in London right must be a top priority for the mayor.

The last real claim in "Working for London"—although it is made four or five times—is that, if we go for PPP, the private sector will accept the risk. My right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) also made that point. It is argued that, under a bond system, the risk would remain in the public sector. That is true, but it is why the sums of money vary so much. The document points out that the cost overrun on the Jubilee line is almost 100 per cent.

When we consider the different costs of raising the money, we must bear in mind the fact that Treasury bonds would be issued at 4.5 per cent., whereas, under the private finance initiative—the PPP is effectively that—the charge would be 10 per cent. or 15 per cent. Even if we could persuade firms to do the work at 10 per cent., we would double the cost of raising the money through issuing bonds. The private sector is not stupid; it does not take on the risk for nothing. It doubles the initial cost of the project, and that is at only 10 per cent. Many of the private finance initiative schemes that the Department of Health conducted when building hospitals came in at more than 15 per cent.—200 per cent. more than the initial cost. The private sector takes on the risk, but it charges more than if one had taken the risk oneself.

Mr. Wilkinson: Is it not the case that almost anything is better than the PPP? Bonds have an advantage in terms of a competitive interest rate. However, the genuine denationalisation of the tube system would allow it to run commercially and without a premium, which the PPP would involve. The PPP, with very short leases and the uncertain risks that the private sector has to accept in a management divided between the infrastructure companies in the private sector and the operating companies in the public sector, is the worst of all worlds.

Mr. Livingstone: I take on board the complaints of my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras that the current leadership of London Underground has handled the Jubilee line unsatisfactorily. Nobody suggests that the money raised should simply be given to the current management of London Transport to repeat the errors that it made on the Jubilee line. The method is clear: we raise the money as cheaply as possible, bring in a contractor to do the work on a contract for a fixed price and at a fixed time. That is the norm in such operations all over the world. Part of the risk is transferred to the private sector, but we would have to pay for that in the initial cost.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Does my hon. Friend agree that the public are grateful that he has opened the debate on financing the improvements to the infrastructure of the London underground? Everyone agrees that we have to make those improvements. It is unfortunate if the dictates of internal party discipline mean that we cannot have that debate. Does he also agree that the balance of opinion—professional, informed and academic—is in favour of some sort of bond issue and against the proposal for a public-private partnership that we have been presented with?

Mr. Livingstone: The row about the public-private partnership and the bonds issue is interesting—it is a sign of how good the mayoral system might turn out to be. The candidates have provoked the debate, there has been some adjustment of Government policy—they have been forced into a serious debate, which we have not been having—and there has been a brouhaha about the candidates and personalities, or lack of them. Behind all that, there has been a serious debate in the media about bonds versus PPP. I think that the bonds side has won it, although I almost dropped dead when I saw that *The Economist* had said "Ken Livingstone is right" on the bonds issue.

I do not want to be cruel to anyone in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, but there was a wonderful moment last Monday when the *Evening Standard* rang DETR and asked whether it could name a single independent expert who supported its case on the PPP. The only one it could come up with was Deutsche Bank, which of course is not independent—it is advising the Government on the whole affair. There is no independent support for its position, so I think that the PPP will be adjusted to reflect the political realities.

Mr. Cohen: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Livingstone: I shall take a last intervention.

Mr. Cohen: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way so that I can make one print before we leave the issue of

[Mr. Cohen]

risk. It has been claimed that there will be no risk to the public sector if a PPP is used, but is it not likely that that will not be the case? Is it not almost certain that any PPP contract will say that any major risks such as flooding or disaster would be dealt with by the state?

Mr. Livingstone: I am happy to confirm what my hon. Friend says. I understand that Lord Macdonald, the Minister for Transport, spent an entertaining couple of hours with members of the London Labour group of MPs and made it absolutely clear that major elements of risk such as flooding and disaster would still be dealt with by the Government. No firm would sign a completely open-ended contract without such a commitment.

Let me conclude by dealing with congestion charges. Although there are debates in the Labour party over PPP versus bonds they will be resolved by the selection of a Labour, candidate; but coming into focus is the issue that divides the parties—the congestion tax. Unless the Conservative party moves back to the much more sensible position of supporting congestion charging, which it used to hold, it will have no policy to tackle the problems being experienced on our roads. Today's rush hour lasts all day, and extends to Saturdays and Sundays, and London's streets are clogged seven days a week, virtually from dawn until dusk—they are becoming a nightmare.

Let us not forget that congestion charging is not some wicked Marxist scheme; it comes from the Chicago school of economics and is one of Milton Friedman's little ideas. Many Labour Members have been reluctant to accept it because we would rather have had a congestion charge under which great big expensive cars paid more—that would have put a progressive element into the charge—but we have not been allowed that.

All the studies show, however, that a reasonable congestion charge could reduce the number of cars driving into central London by 15 per cent., thus freeing up the roads, allowing traffic to move and increasing traffic speed. Resources would also be freed for investment in public transport. A charge of £5 a day to travel into a small congestion zone has been suggested by London First, the business organisation. A small central zone—running between Park lane and the City and between south of Euston road and north of the River Thames—with each car being charged £5 to enter it, Monday to Friday, would produce £250 million. That is where we should look for the money to buy new buses, to hire conductors to speed them up and to get the buses properly cleaned again.

I know that some of my hon. Friends are unhappy about my commitment to freeze fares for four years, but I must point out that transport policies and patterns change dramatically and quickly. When the Labour GLC cut fares the second time—by 24 per cent., with the permission of the Law Lords in 1983—there was a 70 per cent. increase in ridership on public transport. We got 110 per cent. of our original fare levels in; we cut fares, but still made more income. Although many Members have forgotten this, the following year we were able to cut the rates in London by 7.5 per cent. because that extra money was flowing in.

Once Londoners realise that they have a Labour mayor, backed by a Labour Government, who is committed to a long-term investment strategy for the underground, bringing back more buses, enforcing the bus lane rules and using the congestion charge, travel patterns will begin to change. We will lock ourselves into an improving spiral: the better it gets, the more people will leave their cars at home and in a year or two we will most probably be making money. We will be able to use the increased fare income to start a much bigger expansion of the system.

The Government's policy is absolutely right. They have tabled an amendment that unites my party—it unites all our candidates, at any rate—and draws attention to the clear and obvious choice facing London: a Tory party that is simply banging the drum to whip up hysteria and pretending that we are anti-car, or a Labour party with a coherent package of policies that will make this city a fit and comfortable place to live in once again.

6.56 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I have enjoyed taking part in the mayoral hustings which this debate has been for most of the evening, although it has not been particularly enlightening. It has been nice to listen to the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) and the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), but they have reconfirmed my view that I would prefer, by 100 per cent., my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) as mayor. I wonder where on earth the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) is this evening and why she has chosen not to take part in this important debate on transport in London. Perhaps the press will ask her that question in the days ahead.

I was particularly unhappy about one remark made by the hon. Member for Brent, East.

Mr. Livingstone: Only one?

Mr. Gray: Well, as always, I was unhappy with everything he had to say, although he speaks in such a personable and charming way that it is difficult to disagree with him. I disagreed in particular when he referred to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) as a retread. Suppose the hon. Gentleman were to be elected mayor of London; who could possibly be more of a tired old retread as leader of local government in London than him?

Mr. Ian Bruce: My hon. Friend will also recall the great honesty with which the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) began his speech. He said that he had spent 20 years coming across to Parliament to try to get money, so I do not know what he thinks the new mayor will get. If he gets the job and a Labour Government are in power, there will be no chance of him ever getting any money.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend makes a good point. As an outside observer, I find it absolutely astonishing that anybody should possibly want the relatively worthless post of mayor of London. It seems to come with no money, no powers and no status at all, so I am baffled that so many people are falling over themselves to gain it, although it takes all sorts.

The British display a curious trait in conversation. When we get together, we like to complain; indeed, we are great complainers. As we all know, we like to

complain in particular about the weather—it is only natural, and we all do it. We like to complain about sport, particularly cricket, and the awful performances of the England team are a constant source of amusement to us.

Mr. Geraint Davies: And transport.

Mr. Gray: From a sedentary position, the hon. Gentleman picks me up on the precise point that I was about to make. Since the second world war, we have particularly enjoyed complaining about the awfulness of our transport. We love to say how dirty it is, what delays we have experienced, how desperate the system is and what an awful time we have had reaching our destination. When we arrive, people say, "Oh dear, have you had a terrible journey?" We expect the trains to be late and expect to be held up at airports, but it is interesting to consider the statistics: delays on trains are less than a quarter of those experienced during air travel. We all expect to be delayed when we travel by plane, but are surprised to be delayed when we travel by train.

We love to talk about British Rail in particular—its awful sandwiches, the awful carriages, the wet platforms, the lateness of the trains, the rudeness of the staff and the fact that there were not enough trains, although they went to the wrong place anyway—and say, "Wasn't Mr. Beeching dreadful to have abolished all those lines?" We love complaining about transport. Within that inherent British characteristic lies the appalling tragedy—the irony—of the appointment of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to take charge of transport: no matter what he does, he will not solve the problems of British transport. Nobody will do that, because they are far too deep and far too intractable to be solved. Even if they were solved, we would still complain.

We will certainly not solve the difficult, intractable problems of British transport by soundbites, launches, aspirations and glossy brochures, which is all that we have had so far from the right hon. Gentleman. I had the honour to serve on the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. When the Minister for Housing and Planning appeared before the Committee, we had occasion to comment that the Government suffered from a lack of any policy on transport that was worth talking about, apart from aspirations and glossy brochures.

The tendency to launch things all the time and talk about hopes and aspirations for the future is typified by the integrated transport White Paper, which was launched with such tremendous acclaim by the Government about two years ago. The Government said that they would produce nine so-called daughter documents, but they have produced only seven. It is typical of the Government that, two and a half years after they came to power, they have not done what they said they were going to do. They produced a huge, glossy paper and seven daughter documents.

The Government have now gone on from that to the Transport Bill, and what an empty Bill it is, despite its 235 clauses and 26 schedules. The Strategic Rail Authority is yet another new Labour quango—yet another committee which has been designed to solve our problems, but which will do little worth talking about. It is interesting to read the explanatory memorandum to the Bill, which shows that the total take from the 48 per cent. privatisation of National Air Traffic Services will be £345 million. NATS has £300 million of debt, which leaves £45 million. The cost of the privatisation will be £35 million, which leaves the sum total of £10 million to £15 million net take. That is hardly a dramatic and fantastic policy. The Bill also contains proposals on road traffic charging and workplace charging.

After two and a half years in which we had the integrated transport White Paper and the seven daughter documents that the Government got round to producing, we now have this empty little Bill that does little other than to set up another quango. One of the two daughter documents that has not yet appeared is about the Government's action plan to encourage walking. On 29 March, the Secretary of State announced:

"The Government will also this summer be issuing its action plan to encourage walking."—[*Official Report*, 29 March 1999; Vol. 328, c. 470W.]

Perhaps it is just as well that it has not been produced, given his bad hair day during the Labour party conference—which we observed with amusement—when he himself ignored the Government's action plan to encourage walking.

We have heard plenty about London but, in a spirit of helpfulness, I shall address the other half of our motion, which refers to transport in general. The tube has been discussed by right hon. and hon. Friends whose London credentials are better than mine. The central flaw in the Secretary of State's proposals in the White Paper is that he has slipped back into an old Labour way of thinking about transport planning. No longer are we proposing to provide services that people wish to buy and that allow the market to work. No longer are we proposing that we should make British Airways the best airline in the world, so that people will fly on it and the company will make a profit. No longer are we arguing that we should privatise British Airports Authority and make it the best airport authority in the world, so that it offers the best service and people will want to use it. No longer are we proposing to privatise British Rail—of which I am a passionate supporter—in the hope that business men will move in and through the profit motive will improve the railways.

The Government are now saying, "We clever fellows in London and the civil service in Whitehall know what is best about transport. We are going to have an integrated transport White Paper. Aren't we frightfully clever?" Integrated transport—what a marvellous thing, what a great expression. The commentators in the north London wine bars, the transport lobbyists and the green lobbyists threw their hats in the air and said, "Isn't that marvellous. Integrated transport—just what we've always wanted." Anyone who knows anything about centralised planning in eastern Europe knows that integrated transport is a figment of the Secretary of State's imagination. It does not exist—there is no such thing. It is an easy soundbite—a throw-away line.

The only way to improve transport—whether on the roads, in the air or on trains—is by using the market. Labour Members do not like that: they like central planning. They want the Government to be in charge and to tell people what is best for them. I shall show how the market could be used better to improve transport. It may seem odd, but I shall use the example of roads policy.

Presumably, the only purpose of congestion charging is to reduce congestion. All Members are committed to reducing congestion where we can. It is terrible to be

[Mr. Gray]

stuck in a traffic jam. Any sensible politician of any party wants to reduce congestion, but who wants us to reduce congestion on the roads by congestion charging? It is the people who are rich enough to pay the taxes so that they can drive unhindered on the roads. No one ever says, "Fine, bring in congestion and workplace charging and motorist taxation because I can't afford it. If you introduce those measures, I shall volunteer to put my car in the garage and walk to work." Of course no one says that. The only people interested in the motorist taxation that the Government have proposed are those who are rich enough to have the luxury of saying, "Get all those other people off the road, so that I can drive to work safely."

Let us take an extreme example. The hon. Member for Brent, East suggested a congestion charge for entry into London of £5, and others have referred to a charge of up to £10 a day.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: I shall happily do so in a moment.

There is talk of a workplace charge of up to £2,000 a year in London, although it would be less elsewhere.

Mr. Livingstone: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: In a moment.

Who is prepared to pay £10 a day, £50 a week, or £3,500 a year for congestion charging and £2,000 for workplace parking—which is £6,000 of taxed income—for the privilege of bringing their car into London? It is the stockbroker who wants to come in from Surbiton to the City of London. He does not mind the charges. He puts them down to his company and it pays the £5,000 or £10,000 a year. Who cares anyway? He will just say, "That's great, thank you very much." It is a fat cats charter.

What about people on a low wage, old people, young mothers who are dependent on their motor car not only in London but throughout the nation? To those people, £5,000 or £10,000 a year is a lot. If the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, perhaps he will deal with that point.

Mr. Davies *rose—*

Mr. Livingstone *rose—*

Mr. Gray: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) and then to the hon. Member for Brent, East.

Mr. Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman explain why, if he is in favour of using market systems alongside policy, he is not in favour of congestion charges? The nature of a market is to ration consumption on the basis of price. He may be against charges for moral reasons, but he cannot at the same time be in favour of using markets. After all, there are public transport choices.

Mr. Gray: I thought that I was explaining quite well why I believe that congestion charging is not a terribly good thing for ordinary road users. The point that I was about to make, if the hon. Gentleman had given me a second, was that the greater the congestion in London, the greater the incentive for people to use public transport.

I could come to the House from Chippenham, in my constituency, by car. Given the travel allowance system in the House, it would be slightly to my financial advantage to come by car, but I would no more consider driving into London from Chippenham than fly. I always park my car at Chippenham station and come by train. That is by far the most convenient way to travel, because it would take me far longer to come into town by car because of London congestion.

Congestion charging operates against the market, because it fiddles with the market. My approach is to use the market, but congestion charging interferes with it. I am keen to hear what the hon. Member for Brent, East has to say on the subject.

Mr. Livingstone: The hon. Gentleman asked about the two taxes that the Government propose for the use of the mayor. There is an overwhelming consensus in the business community in favour of the congestion charge, and overwhelming opposition to a workplace car-parking tax. My view, and the undertaking that I have given, is that we should proceed with the congestion charge and put the workplace car-parking tax on hold. If we are to make changes like this, we need to carry business and the wider London community with us.

I accept that it is a question of pricing. Going to a film at a cinema in Leicester square will cost £9, whereas seeing the same film at Staples corner will cost £4.50. Why should we assume that driving in the most congested and expensive bit of real estate in Europe should cost the same as driving elsewhere?

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman says that the business community is especially keen on congestion charging. That was exactly my point. Of course the business community is keen; of course the banks in the City—I used to work in one—are delighted. They do not care about paying £10. Indeed, they would pay £100 a day to convey their chairmen to the City of London in a quarter of an hour.

What I want to know is this. What consultations has the Labour party had with groups of disabled people? What consultations has it had with the unions in regard to low wage earners? What consultations has it had with old people—people who need their motor cars, and who will be taxed off the road if the charges are to work? If the Government say that that is not their intention, and that such people will not be taxed off the road, I put it to them that there is no chance that their congestion charge will work. It is certain that the fat cats will not be taxed off the road. If the Government find a way of allowing housewives, young mothers, disabled people or members of the other categories that I have mentioned to stay on the road, the amount of congestion will not be reduced, and all that we shall have is a revenue raiser for the mayor.

As is clear from the Greater London Authority Act 1999, the tax is for only 10 years, at least here in London. That speaks for itself. The Government are a great one for talking about hypothecation, and how important it is for taxes such as this to go towards improving public transport: they love talking about that. But hypothecation works only if several

conditions are met. First, a congestion charge must be permanent, and every penny earned through it must go towards improving public transport. However, as the Act makes clear, after 10 years, the money will go to the mayor for him to spend as he wishes.

Secondly, the charge must be additional. It must not let the Government off the hook, and allow them not to do things that should properly be financed by taxation; it must be confined to public transport projects that the Government would not otherwise initiate. That principle of additionality, which is terribly important, has already been breached in the context of the national lottery. The Government's introduction of the new opportunities fund breaches it fundamentally. Hypothecation must be both permanent and additional, but the Government's proposals adhere to neither of those principles.

The Government are determined to drive the proud motorist off the road. That may work in the case of certain categories, such as friends of new Labour in their Jaguars, but it will not work for my constituents. It is all very easy for the Government to talk about public transport, to say how important it is to approve of it, and to say that they will use motoring taxes for that purpose. That, of course, is fine for those who have the great good fortune to live in towns or cities, but most people in Britain, who live in the country or in market towns—there is an increasing move from cities into market towns—cannot imagine a form of public transport that could replace the motor car.

Let us consider Mr. and Mrs. Average in Cepen Park south or Monkton Park in Chippenham, in my constituency. Mr. Average drives to work in his car: he has to, because he works in Swindon, which is 10 or 15 miles away. There is no other method of getting to Swindon, because the station is some distance from where they live. Mrs. Average takes her children to school, goes to Safeway, travels to her job as a primary school teacher in the town, picks up her son on the way back and takes him to football, takes her daughter to ballet, comes home in the evening and then goes out herself. That could not be done without a motor car. No other form of transport could possibly meet Mr. and Mrs. Average's daily transport needs.

The Government blithely say that they will raise petrol prices to a level higher than anywhere else in Europe—that they will drive them through the roof.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: I may do so in a moment, but I am being rather generous in taking interventions.

The Government say that they will drive petrol prices through the roof, and bung on parking charges and workplace taxes. They say that they will use those charges to pay for public transport. That is fine and hunky-dory for those who happen to live in London.

Mr. Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that he would cut the price of petrol consumption by cutting tax, and would not introduce congestion charges? Would that not cause gridlock in the City of London, and lead to an economic turndown?

Mr. Gray: It is fascinating that the hon. Gentleman should refer to the City of London. It must have been lobbying particularly hard on this issue. My concern is not for the City of London, but for London as a whole, and for the town of Chippenham.

Mr. Paterson: May I return to my hon. Friend's point about those who live in rural areas? Where I live, two thirds of people drive to work. A congestion charge, or an excessive petrol duty, is a pure tax that will hit the lowest paid. The money—which in my hon. Friend's case will be levied by an authority in Swindon, and in mine by an authority in Telford—will be spent on public transport, and will be of no benefit to those living in outlying villages.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend has made a telling point. As I have said many times, we will certainly vote against the introduction of any congestion charge now or in the future. It would be to the disadvantage of my constituents in North Wiltshire, irrespective of what is felt by the friends of the hon. Member for Croydon, Central in the City of London. I am amazed to hear him speak up for them.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we would abolish the fuel escalator if we were in power. I was puzzled by what the Chancellor of the Exchequer had to say in his pre-Budget statement in recent weeks. He said that the automatic escalator—the automatic increase in petrol prices above inflation—would not necessarily occur, although he was careful not to say that it would not occur. Table B9, on page 154 of the pre-Budget report, shows an increase in fuel duties from £21.6 billion last year to £22.5 billion this year, and to £23.5 billion next year. That means a 4.6 per cent. increase in the Treasury's next tax take in fuel duties.

If the report is to be believed—given that it was produced by civil servants rather than politicians, I am certain that it is to be believed—it shows that the Government have every intention of increasing petrol duties by more than inflation for at least two years. We will scrutinise the corresponding page in the Red Book next year, to discover whether the Government plan to do the same.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that, if the Government are serious about hypothecation, they ought to tell us tonight for what proportion of the proceeds of taxes on road users public expenditure on transport should account by the end of the current Parliament?

Mr. Gray: Indeed they should, but I suspect that they are reluctant to do so, for the very good reason given by none other than Mr. Lloyd George, the then Prime Minister, in 1909, when he introduced vehicle excise duty. He said, in this place,

> "It is clear that our present system of roads and of road-making is inadequate . . . the State has for a long period done nothing at all for our roads . . . both the general public and motorists are crying out for something to be done and we propose to make a real start."

New Labour language, in 1909!

Lloyd George continued:

> "my proposal is that the whole of the money raised . . . should go to the improvement of roads."

That was hypothecation in 1909, and hypothecation in 1999 is precisely the same. It is very hypothetical. The Government may give lip service to it for a day or two—

[Mr. Gray]

for 10 years, in the case of London—but the possibility that the extra money taken from the motorist's pocket will be used for transport for all time is extremely remote.

Mr. Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not. I have been a little generous to him, and I am not certain that either of his earlier interventions justified my generosity.

Neither the proposals in the integrated transport White Paper nor the Bill that we shall shortly consider will lead to an improvement in our transport system. In fact, we have a standstill Britain, a gridlocked Britain, a Britain waiting in a bus queue in the pouring rain. Incidentally, my researcher tells me that recently he could not use the new Jubilee line extension, which had been closed for a day, and had to stand in the pouring rain waiting for bus in the east end of London—for no less a reason than that the Deputy Prime Minister was going to open the Jubilee line extension, which therefore had to be closed in the meantime.

This is a Britain standing in a bus queue in the pouring rain; a Britain crammed into a filthy, overheated underground. Nothing that the Deputy Prime Minister has said today, in the integrated transport White Paper or in his Bill will make any difference to those realities.

It is not necessary for us to knock the Deputy Prime Minister because there are plenty of his detractors on the Government Benches. If I were him, I would find most worrying about the debate the warmth with which some Labour Members welcomed his appearance, saying how unassailable is his position. It is interesting that, in *The Times* this morning, the Prime Minister's official spokesman described the Deputy Prime Minister as

"an excellent man doing an excellent job".

I suspect that that is Campbell-speak for, "He's on his way." If he is not on his way, I rather enjoyed the *Private Eye* front page today. It has a picture of the Deputy Prime Minister standing in a station. The announcement over the loudspeaker says:

"I regret to announce that my departure has been delayed."

7.20 pm

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I was disappointed by the speech of the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). It seems that, even on an Opposition day, Conservative Members have to filibuster because not enough of them want to speak. I shall try to be brief as I know that many Labour Members wish to speak.

I have no wish to speak about the tube. I have no wish to be the mayor of London, but I want to talk about something that is important to that city, as it is to the rest of country: the west coast main line, which starts in Euston, not Glasgow; history tells us that. It is 550 miles long. It is the busiest rail link in Europe. It carries more than 2,000 passenger and freight trains every day. I want to contrast what happened under the Conservative Government with what is happening under a Labour Government.

The west coast main line was upgraded and electrified in the 1960s. Privatisation did not do that. It was done under British Rail; it was probably British Railways in the 1960s. It was done under a Labour Government.

The east coast main line was upgraded to a high standard under the previous Government, but the west coast main line had a major problem. No money was put in for many years. As has been mentioned, one of the reasons was that Mrs. Thatcher did not like railways.

Those of us who go past Crewe station every week when we travel from our constituencies see in the museum the advanced passenger train. It was a tilting train that was designed and built in Britain. It is the predecessor of all the tilting trains that are running in Europe. That train was cancelled by the Conservative Government.

Mrs. Thatcher did not like the train. An attempt was made to put it in service too quickly. A group of journalists were taken to Glasgow. I am afraid that they overindulged there and returned on the tilting train. As the tilt was not quite right, it made them ill. The train got a bad press and was thrown out.

I have been to parts of Europe where tilting trains are successfully run and built. People have adapted the technology from the APT and run it in their country. Unfortunately, the UK has to buy that technology back.

From that time, things started to go downhill on the west coast main line. Hon. Members may remember that there was going to be a train called West Coast 250. It was an advanced version of what runs on the east coast main line. In the early 1990s, the Conservative Government cancelled that train and left us with no plans to upgrade the west coast main line. At that point, I founded the all-party group on the west coast main line. I have co-chaired it ever since with the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day).

The west coast main line went through many false dawns under the previous Government. As has been said, a press conference was held every other week on its upgrading. We pressured one Chancellor of the Exchequer so much that he announced in the Budget that £500 million would be made available. When I spoke to the Minister with responsibility for transport at the time, Mr. Roger Freeman, I found that there was no money.

Then, a little money was made available: enough for 13 train sets on the west coast main line—*[Interruption.]* They are called train sets, as any puffer nutter will confirm. The choice was between those trains and more commuter trains in the south-east. Of course, the Government of the time picked the trains for the south-east and we lost out.

Then, we had privatisation. Everything stopped for privatisation. In fact, on the west coast main line, many of the trains stopped because maintenance was not carried out. Timetables were reduced. The number of trains was decreased because the trains were not reliable. Privatisation came along. Richard Branson and Virgin Trains took over the line. The only thing that happened was that his reputation plummeted because the trains did not get better; they got worse. It was not until the Labour Government were elected that things started to happen.

We now have a contract for 55 tilting trains on the west coast main line. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) pointed out, it is not Mr. Branson who owns them. He signed a contract to lease them, but they are owned by a company called Angel Trains. The journey time from Manchester will be reduced to one hour 50 minutes and from Glasgow to under four hours. If I tell hon. Members that it took me

five and a half hours last week to get to my constituency in Carlisle, they will realise that that is a major improvement.

A total of £1 billion has been invested in the west coast main line since the Labour Government came to power. Railtrack has put out contracts worth £800 million to help to upgrade the line, but it has deteriorated that much over the years that it is estimated that it will cost £4 billion to upgrade the line. That shows the neglect under the last Conservative Government.

Come 2002, we will see the benefits of the Labour Government's policy on the west coast main line. We will see tilting trains. Come 2005, they will run at 140 mph. Under the Conservatives, there was total neglect. We were not in London. We were not important, yet the country's prosperity depends on the west coast main line more than on any other line.

Mr. Ronnie Fearn (Southport): I have to suffer the west coast main line and was two hours late getting into London only last week. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, even though, under the Labour Government, we will get new trains and new rolling stock—I believe Richard Branson when he says that—Railtrack is still the problem? If Railtrack does not improve, we will still have the trains that we have today running late. Tilting trains are very nice—I did not go with the hon. Gentleman to see the tilting trains—but they will not improve the position unless Railtrack improves.

Mr. Martlew: The hon. Gentleman is right, but we have in Tom Winsor a rail regulator—the all-party group on the west coast main line had a meeting today—who will insist that Railtrack gets the line right. If it does not, it will pay the penalty, which will be many millions of pounds. Therefore, I am convinced that, under the present Government, we will see advantages.

Some of the criticism of the Government is because the new rolling stock is not yet running and the line has not yet been improved but, come 2001–2002, people will see the difference that the Labour Government have made.

I touch on one more point: the Settle-to-Carlisle railway line. I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) is not in his place. His reputation is a bit better in Carlisle than in other parts of the country as he was the transport Minister who saved that line. The only problem was that he did not give us any money, so the line has deteriorated ever since. Only last week, I was there to see the start of work on the line after an extra £18 million was made available because of what the Government are doing.

A renaissance in the railways is not only in progress, but is necessary—as we all know, we shall not be able to build many more roads. The renaissance is also one of the Government's priorities, and we shall soon see the benefits of it.

7.30 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): This will be one of my shortest speeches, as my voice will not last very long, and I am grateful to be called to speak so early. Upstairs, in my locker, I have a small bottle of vodka that I have not opened in about three years. I think that, immediately after my speech, I shall do so.

It was particularly pleasant to hear my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) make his very welcome speech. Although we have had to wait two and a half years for him to return to the House, I know that his career will continue strongly.

It was also interesting to be present in the Chamber with some of the candidates for the London mayoralty. The candidates, and the official Opposition motion, really highlighted the London aspect of the debate. In many ways, it is very easy to criticise the Deputy Prime Minister for his lack of progress on transport in London, but anyone doing the job would have made a mess of it. The Deputy Prime Minister has certainly not disappointed us in that probability. In many ways, however, the London aspect of the debate is only a distraction.

Transport problems in the rest of the United Kingdom—such as, as the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) was saying, those affecting the west coast main line and cities and towns outside London—could be solved. Not every UK town and city suffers from the same traffic problems afflicting London. As many hon. Members represent London constituencies, and all hon. Members know and suffer from London's traffic problems, our analysis of the traffic problem has been Londoncentric. We shall have to decide on solutions without reference solely to London.

Some interesting statistics have been bandied about in the debate—such as those on how the previous Government, in 18 years, allowed road traffic to increase by 40 per cent. In the past two and a half years, however, road traffic has increased by 13 per cent. Therefore, under the previous Government, traffic increased by 2.25 per cent. annually, whereas, now, it is increasing by 7 per cent. annually. That increase is regarded by some hon. Members as something of which we should be ashamed, but that is nonsense.

The Government should be saying, "Isn't it brilliant—aren't we doing well? Every year, 7 per cent. more people are driving cars—which is 4.75 per cent. more than under the Tories. That increase is possible because the economy is working very well." When one stops to examine how real people are using—and paying to operate—real cars, one realises that they are able to do so only because they are getting jobs. In the past three or four years, unemployment has been declining rapidly, and we should welcome that.

We should welcome the fact that people can afford cars, and develop our policies to deal with that fact. It is nonsense simply to play King Canute and say, "The car is bad. Let's ban cars." However, the Government are beginning, slowly—but, I hope, increasingly rapidly, once the Deputy Prime Minister realises that he is on the skids—to change their anti-car policies.

What have the Government done to deal with road congestion in London? They have done very little to develop policies on overground and underground train transport or on car use. In the past two years, the Greenwich dome and the London Eye have been the Government's real, big policies for London. What are those policies designed to do? Their major purpose is to bring more people into London—the most congested place in the world.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that 70 per cent. of expected visitors to

[Mr. Christopher Leslie]

the millennium dome will travel by London underground, and that there are no private car-parking spaces around the dome?

Mr. Bruce: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman gave me that information, especially as the intervention allowed me to take a sip of water, so that I might keep speaking that bit longer. I am doubly grateful to him.

If the hon. Gentleman had accompanied us on the countryside march—some Labour Members came along—he would have known what it was like trying to reach the beginning of the march using the underground. Although I know that the Jubilee line will—touch wood—be opening on time to carry passengers to the millennium dome, for the countryside march—which was on a Sunday, not during the week—the underground simply ground to a halt.

If the hon. Gentleman had ever travelled on the underground—from his remarks, I rather suspect that he has not—he would know that it is ludicrous to think that those hundreds of thousands of people will travel to the dome in the off-peak period. The tickets are expensive, and people will want to get their money's worth. At Disneyland, in America and in Paris, for example, people turn up very early in the morning.

I am not a spoilsport, and want such events to be held and a success, but such events do not comprise a policy on the underground.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that, although his comments on the ability to afford the purchase of a car are entirely justified, in that context, he should properly also note that, between April 1993 and May 1997, the unemployment rate was falling at a faster rate than it has done since the general election?

Mr. Bruce: My hon. Friend and I know those facts very well, but I was trying to get Opposition Members on our side—not to remind them that progress has slowed down. As they will know very well, since the new deal for young people was introduced, the situation for young people has become worse. The Labour Government were doing brilliantly until they introduced that policy.

Let us assume that the Government will be successful in that new deal policy, and that all young people will find a job when they leave school. What is the first thing that youngsters want when they find a job, or even before finding a job? They want to go out and buy a car. I have four kids and—I am sorry—I cannot stop any of them from buying a car. I certainly did not pay for any of the cars—

Mr. Bercow: Too mean.

Mr. Bruce: Yes. Nevertheless, as their father, I could not stop them from buying a car. They went out and bought their own cars. If I cannot stop such a purchase as a father, I do not think that I shall be able to do so as a politician.

We are constantly being told about technology. We should remember that, of all forms of transport, pollution levels have been reduced only in automobiles. There may be schemes to allow people to reach the dome by public transport and to ensure that there is no public car-parking, but people will still drive—to an underground station, probably in a neighbourhood in London, where they will park—*[Interruption.]*

The hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) is shaking his head, but he really should make a speech on the subject later. The fact is that people going to the dome will park across London, clogging up streets in neighbourhoods in which people are trying to go about their ordinary business, before boarding the underground to the dome.

We should also be rejoicing, as there is a silver lining to every problem. People are using their cars more, but road taxes are very high. Even without putting another penny on fuel tax, tax revenue is increasing massively. As we heard earlier in the debate, the Red Book shows massive sums being raised in fuel tax, and I think that the Red Book even underestimates the sums.

The Government are raising massive additional sums from their stealth and direct taxes, and that money should be going, now, to local authorities. I do not believe that local authorities in the type of constituency that I represent will impose congestion charging.

I am speaking in this debate primarily to try to express to the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) what I was trying, in a very short time, to tell him yesterday. Yesterday, I spent 10 minutes talking to him about a road scheme in my constituency, and spent eight of those minutes trying to convince him that his civil servants were wrong to stop him from taking an information package from the leader of the Labour group on my local council, who wanted the Minister to see that information.

When one is talking to a Minister about a specific problem, one often discovers that civil servants have captured that Minister—who simply does not know what is going on. Ministers are cloistered in their headquarters, at the top of Victoria street, and have their own individual cars to bring them to Question Time. I suspect that there are many ministerial cars outside right now. Each minister has a car—the engine of which is usually kept running, just in case the Minister wants to make a fast getaway, or because the chauffeur is trying to keep warm. They are all using a car.

As so many new properties were being built off the main road in my constituency—the Dorchester road—it was decided, 40 years ago, that we should have a relief road. In that 40 years, we have withstood the usual planning inquiries and meetings on route changes.

Twelve years ago, when I arrived in my constituency, I went to the opening of the first part of the Dorchester relief road, which linked the old Dorchester road round the town. The machinery that had been used was still parked there because the authorities thought that they were about to be given permission by the Government to build the rest of the road to Weymouth. Unfortunately, a nature conservation group persuaded the Government to instigate an inquiry. A cetis warbler, which is a common bird in the north of France, had flown across the Channel and set up shop in my constituency. That was such a rare occurrence that we could not have the road. The birds did not nest on the roadside, but they were likely to fly across it once a year or so.

We have gone through the whole procedure. We have had two public inquiries and every political party has signed up to the brown route. Just when the Conservatives lost power, the project was ready to go ahead under the private finance initiative. It was on the Minister's desk at the time. It has been sitting there for two and a half years, although the Government have sent the scheme back to the council, asking for plans for an integrated transport system rather than just a road. They wanted car parks, bus lanes and cycle tracks. That has all been done and the project is still sitting on the Minister's desk.

I understand that, on 15 December, the Minister will have a chance to overturn my majority of 77 at one stroke. Most people who voted Labour in my constituency want the brown route to go ahead. Very few road schemes are popular, but this one is. In a poll conducted by the local newspaper recently, 76 per cent. of people said that they wanted it. I appeal to the Minister to make my evening. I have a terrible cold, but I will not need the vodka if he tells us that the brown route will be built. I am very worried, because the civil servants and the Government office for the south-west said that the Government were not going to build any new roads and I could go and whistle for it. They said that the fact that the Government kept asking for more information was just a delaying tactic. The Minister is an honourable and pleasant guy. I hope that he will take his civil servants by the scruff of the neck—or possibly a bit higher up than that—and say "I've got to get this scheme. He's only got a majority of 77. If we can get that road scheme in, we can overturn him at the next general election."

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that it ill behoves the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) to look quite so smug, because an articulate espousal of the Conservatives' effective opposition to the Government's transport policies will be one of the many factors that will enable the admirable Mr. David Senior, the prospective Conservative parliamentary candidate for Shipley, to ditch him at the general election and join the Conservative party in government?

Mr. Bruce: I did not want to be rude or nasty to anybody. I did not realise the hon. Gentleman's constituency. In fact, I was not even sure that he was a Member of Parliament. He is so young that I thought that perhaps someone had sent their research assistant.

Mr. Leslie *rose—*

Mr. Bruce: I shall give way in a moment. If I attack someone I always let them get their own back. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman wants to have a go at me or support me. I used to be active in Yorkshire politics—indeed, I still am. I once stood for Yorkshire, West in the European elections and had the good fortune to be able to go around with the then Member of Parliament for Shipley. I know the road problems in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. There is a solution to them, but it requires money and it requires the Government to give the hon. Gentleman his road scheme.

Mr. Leslie: The hon. Gentleman talked about his scheme waiting for 40 years. The Bingley relief road project has also been waiting for a long time, but I am delighted to announce that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has given £60 million for it to be completed. Work will start in April 2001 and will finish in 2004. There is no better illustration of delivery in action than that scheme.

Mr. Bruce: I am delighted for the hon. Gentleman, his constituents and my many friends in the area. I am also delighted that the Government can be persuaded to spend £60 million for political advantage. I am not asking for as much to make my road in Dorset whole. We are the only county in the United Kingdom with eight Conservative Members and I am the only one vulnerable to the Labour party. I trashed the Liberal Democrats at the election and very nearly allowed Labour to get in instead.

I was worried to read in the newspaper the other day about the possibility of VAT on ferry fares. I hope that the Minister is listening to this important point. We have a private ferry going from Poole to Swanage. Everybody complains about the fares going up already. If they had to go up by 17.5 per cent.—or even a lower VAT rate—it would be disastrous. Instead of taking the short ferry crossing, people would go the long route round, putting even more traffic on the A31, which has not been improved yet in Dorset, or the Sandford bypass. I am straying into other constituencies, but I am sure that my hon. Friends would like me to mention the problems. I was delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on the Front Bench earlier. I hoped that he was going to be put in charge of London transport, because those of us from Dorset could run it a good deal better than it is being run at the moment.

We have a park-and-ride scheme at Norden that works very well. I think that the Minister knows it.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I opened it, but the hon. Gentleman was not there.

Mr. Bruce: I was grateful to the Minister for opening the extension to the Norden park-and-ride scheme. I apologised to him at the time because I could not be there. I did not want to encourage too many people to come out and demonstrate against him as he came along the Sandford bypass. I was surprised that he ever got to the opening, given the number of people who were likely to demonstrate against him. It was good that it was him, because people thought that the Deputy Prime Minister might come and he would never have got to the opening, because people wanted to demonstrate in favour of their bypass.

The Government have introduced a scheme to extend railways. The Swanage railway is the first private railway that has been rebuilt. Most private heritage railways run on existing track. All the track had been ripped up at Swanage, but it has been built again. A small amount of work is needed to link it to the main system. South West Trains has volunteered to bring an hourly service from Bournemouth to Swanage, which would be a great advantage to my constituents and would give the Labour party some credibility by showing that the Government are doing something about transport.

I hope that the Minister will give us some good news on those projects. If he does not, I should certainly like some by 15 December.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was distracted from reading

[Mr. Andrew Mackinlay]

Horse and Hound in the Library a few moments ago—I was doing some research about the Conservatives—when the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) disturbed me by asking one of her colleagues if he would come and speak in the Chamber because there were not enough Tory Members present. That is an abuse of Parliament. Either we have something to say and should be here or we can go home and let the staff off early.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) has done nothing wrong. What goes on outside the Chamber is nothing to do with me. That is not a point of order and I am sure that the hon. Lady would act honourably at all times.

7.50 pm

Angela Smith (Basildon): I must say that I have some sympathy with my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay). When I first heard that the Conservatives were proposing a vote of no confidence in my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, I expected a lively and interesting debate. When the vote of no confidence failed to materialise and the debate was extended to 10 pm, my expectations soared, but there have been times tonight when I have almost lost the will to live, thanks to the filibustering of Conservative Members who scurried to the Chamber with their notes, trying to find something to say. However, they have found so little to criticise in our transport policy that they have been struggling to find enough Members to speak in the debate. Hon. Members may find it hard to believe, but at times there have been more Liberal Democrat Members than Conservative Members in the Chamber. Hon. Members may be shocked by that, but it demonstrates the lack of attendance by Conservative Members during a debate on an important and serious issue.

The debate has underlined the fact that we face extremely serious transport problems and that the Government have to balance the competing needs of commuters, social travellers, car drivers, public transport and the environment, which has received very little attention tonight. Many of my constituents commute to London for work, social activities and tourism. Despite that, I am one of the few Members speaking in tonight's debate who is not standing for election as London's mayor. [HON. MEMBERS: "Go on."] Although my colleagues are urging me to stand, I must decline.

The debate has concentrated on London, but I should like to refer to congestion generally. Over a number of years journeys have become longer and more difficult. We do not want a quick-fix solution or a sad attempt at making cheap party political points, such as those we have heard this evening. As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said, we need a serious long-term approach to a difficult problem. We need a transport policy that provides choice and is modern, efficient and safe. As I am the first woman to speak in tonight's debate, apart from an intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), I must say that it is a shame that we have not heard more about safety issues.

For a country that used to have pride in balancing a high quality public transport system with the needs of motorists, how did we reach our present predicament? I find the complacency of Opposition Members quite staggering. They speak as though the problems that we now face never existed previously, but, in fact, they have not arisen unexpectedly and caught us unawares. Listening to their speeches, one would think that, until 1997, there had never been a traffic jam, that no one had ever waited for a bus, and that no train had ever been delayed. I do not deny that there are serious problems, but if the Opposition are to have any credibility in their criticisms of the Government, they have to admit that their own failures and actions led us here in the first place.

Like hon. Members on both sides of the House, I am prepared to listen to criticism from members of the public who are frustrated and desperate for a solution, but I take no lectures from Conservative Members who, during their time in government, only made matters worse. Their biggest crime was the loss to the taxpayer of some £895 million in the bargain basement sale of British Rail rolling stock. There has been very little reference to that tonight. We have never had an apology from Conservative Members for that and still no apology is forthcoming. When we consider how that money could have been used to benefit the traveller, and that it now lines the pockets of private business people and is lost to the rail network, it is clearly a public disgrace that we have never had an apology from the Conservatives.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): I take the hon. Lady's remarks to mean that she is urging the Government to renationalise. If she is not, surely she is guilty of attacking her own Government as well as the previous Government.

Angela Smith: What a sad intervention that was. I had hoped for an apology for what had happened to that £895 million. Yet again, I find the Opposition's complacency absolutely staggering.

We should be used to hearing no apologies from the Conservatives as they never apologised for bus deregulation. Hon. Members will remember the great bus wars, when people would arrive at a bus stop and bus after bus would turn up competing for business. Opposition Members are looking anxiously at the clock to see whether they have sufficient speakers for tonight's debate—

Mr. Mackinlay: The hon. Lady is blushing.

Angela Smith: Let me stress that my hon. Friend was referring not to me, but to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait).

The Tories told us that the great bus wars would lead to increased choice and better services and that the competition between existing and new companies would provide better services and more buses. We all know that the result was nothing of the sort.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I have been listening to Labour Members saying how terrible the buses are and what a disaster railway privatisation has been. Why are they not proposing a return to regulation and nationalisation? I do not understand it.

Angela Smith: Conservative Members ask us what we propose to do about that. We are trying, through the integrated Transport Bill, to put policies in place to deal

with the problem. The Conservatives wasted millions of pounds of taxpayers' money and we are trying to put the problem right.

I have lost count of the number of constituents who have complained about inadequate and expensive bus services. They are right to complain. Local authorities are trying hard to finance the provision of bus passes to pensioners who complain that there are too few buses.

Some people come to Members' surgeries and complain about the transport system, but others do not complain. Instead, they get into their cars and drive. According to a MORI poll, 49 per cent. of respondents said that they would use their cars less if bus services were better; 51 per cent. said that they would be willing to take a bus even if a car were available, and 60 per cent. agreed that the bus was better environmentally than the car. Yet, despite knowing all that, the Tories deregulated the buses, with the result that passenger numbers fell by one third. We are still waiting for an apology. That is how we arrived at our present position, which results from Tory failure.

The Opposition have accused us of being anti-car. I am certainly not anti-car. I represent many Ford and Visteon workers and I am proud of their contribution to the economy of my constituency, but car manufacturers recognise that the status quo is not an option. The most anti-car policy would be to do absolutely nothing about congestion.

I was surprised that the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) did not refer to his statements when he was previously in the House. He said that

"congested roads are the sign of a city which is alive and flourishing, not a city on its knees."—[*Official Report*, 5 June 1991; Vol. 192, c. 292.]

Opposition Members may think that congestion is the sign of a flourishing city, but most people sitting in their cars on those congested roads would not agree. Nor is it an option to do nothing about the environmental consequences of traffic and the huge economic and social costs of congestion. The pro-car policy is an integrated and effective transport policy that meets the needs of those who have cars and those who do not. I do not accept the theory of Opposition Members that, because the Government have been so successful in reducing unemployment, everyone now has a car. Some people do not have cars because they cannot afford them or because they prefer not to have them.

The problem is not that we have too many cars—other countries have greater car ownership, but less car usage. The average number of kilometres—I much prefer miles, but this is very modern information—travelled by a British car is 17,000 per year. The Dutch travel 16,000 km per year by car; the French 14,000 km; the Germans 13,000 km; the Italians 12,000 km and the Japanese just 9,000 km. Those countries cannot be accused of being anti-car, but they have a more balanced attitude to car use and offer travellers public transport alternatives. In Britain, 71 per cent. of people use their cars to get to work. How many of them would choose to take public transport? The MORI poll and other evidence shows that more than 50 per cent. would choose alternative forms of transport.

I return for a moment to bus deregulation and raise an issue that I would like my hon. Friend the Minister to address. Bus companies often claim that they are unable to cross-subsidise bus services—in other words, they are not allowed to use profitable routes to subsidise unprofitable routes, even within the same company. According to the Library, there is nothing in transport legislation to prevent bus companies from cross-subsidising. However, it may be that the problem lies in company law. I understand that some bus companies do cross-subsidise, but others feel that cross-subsidising routes and using the profitable routes to subsidise the non-profitable routes may be acting against the interests of shareholders, because it does not maximise profits. That is something that we should look at.

It is a quite unpleasant notion that bus companies can choose the profitable routes to run, but come running back to the Government and local councils for help to run non-profitable routes that provide services for people in their area. We need to investigate that and see why profit cannot be channelled into public service. The problem is that, for too long—until this Government were elected—transport was looked at in purely financial terms. The economic costs of congestion are well documented. There is no doubt that businesses suffer from congestion—deliveries can take longer and staff can be delayed. However, all that can be quantified in purely financial terms. Of equal importance are the social and environmental costs.

I am delighted to report that Essex county council's popular Village link bus services have been honoured by the bus industry awards. This innovative transport scheme received the highly commended award for its achievements in improving public transport in rural areas of Essex county.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell)—who has taken a great interest in rural bus services—passed me this quote:

"I have not used this service yet, but I am looking forward to the summer because I will now be able to travel to Clacton."

Clacton is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich (Mr. Henderson). The surprising thing, given that the scheme was opposed by the Conservative party, is that the quote came from a constituent of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin).

I am not anti-car, and I enjoy driving. I was a member of the House of Commons racing car team last year, with the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce). I saved his skin, because I was last and he was not, so he was not embarrassed. We were conserving fuel and not being too wasteful. We must look at the environmental advances that the car industry has made. I drive a Ford Fiesta, and it would now take 50 of my Ford Fiestas to produce the same exhaust emissions as when the Fiesta was launched. The car companies are playing a role in this area, and I congratulate the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders on the Stop Fuming campaign.

Recently, the Minister for Science, visited Ford in my constituency, and we were able to look at the innovative work being done to improve the environmental impact of the company's cars. Progress is being made in that regard. I have also had the opportunity to test drive a liquid petroleum gas Ford Focus car, and I urge Ministers to look at the opportunities—as well as the tax incentives—to increase the use of LPG, which can reduce carbon dioxide emissions by up to 20 per cent.

The health implications of carrying on as we are and accepting congestion—so praised by the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea—are frightening. I am sorry

[Angela Smith]

that more time has not been spent tonight addressing the health issues. The Department of Health suggests that air pollution accelerates the deaths of between 12,000 and 24,000 vulnerable people each year, and that between 14,000 and 24,000 hospital admissions and readmissions each year may be associated with short-term air pollution. Reported asthma cases have trebled in the past 20 years. The House will agree that those statistics are alarming, and I am appalled that the Conservative party views them so dispassionately. The Opposition's contempt for public safety is well illustrated by their attitude to traffic calming measures. I fully support 20 mph zones outside schools, and I fail to understand how anyone could reject a measure that could save the lives of children.

The Tories' record on transport is disgraceful, and their policies have led us to where we are today. Where we go from here is crucial to the future. Nobody wants to sit in stationary traffic, watching people walking by. If we carry on as we are, we shall grind to a halt. We must provide a decent public transport system that is properly funded and will encourage people to get out of their cars and on to public transport.

There was a joke that we used in my constituency at the last election. It worked for us, and I hope that it will work in this case. It was that there are no problems in life—only challenges and opportunities. The previous Government left us enough challenges and opportunities to pick up and run with. but I have confidence that the Secretary of State can deal with these problems.

8.4 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I am pleased that the Deputy Prime Minister has returned to his seat. I hope that he will enjoy what I have to say.

Mr. Prescott: I am just leaving.

Mr. Brake: I am insulted. Perhaps the Deputy Prime Minister will read my speech in *Hansard* tomorrow.

Over the past few years, the state of the tube in London has rarely been out of the news. Sadly, the Government's answer to this crisis has never looked so misplaced. We are now more than half way through the Parliament, but the Government have yet to make a start on delivering the investment that is needed to expand London's underground and give Londoners a real choice and a chance to leave their cars at home and travel by public transport.

Last week, answers I received from the Minister with responsibility for London showed that, since 1 January 1998, there have been 5,544 delays to passenger services of 15 minutes or more. The combined total for the two years prior to that was 3,554. In 1997, those figures were described by the Capital Transport campaign as a crisis. Delays over these two years have increased by 56 per cent. It is clear that the Government have not only failed to improve the underground service but have presided over a significant deterioration.

The reasons for some of the delays make interesting reading. The usual suspects are there, of course. Leaves on the track accounted for three delays in the past couple of years, so perhaps some progress has been made in this area. However, vomit caused 10 delays. This involuntary action was no doubt induced by reading the leader of the Conservative party's endorsement of the failed Tory mayoral candidate, Lord Archer, as a man of probity and integrity.

One delay was due to a surfer who was, no doubt, riding on the new wave of investment and improvement promised by the Tories in their latest policy document. They are apparently offering a "Londoners' tube". Let us give credit where it is due. The Conservatives have at least realised that there is a tube in London. A "Londoners' tube"—what on earth does that mean?

Mr. Green: It means a tube that will be owned by Londoners, in which free shares will be offered to people who live in London, those who work on the tube and those who have season tickets. It is a much better, more practical and more popular policy than the one with which the Government are saddling the tube.

Mr. Brake: I suppose I should thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but we contacted Conservative central office to ask what the policy amounted to. It was not able to tell us—perhaps the hon. Gentleman should speak to Conservative central office.

Other reasons for delay included "smell on the train". No doubt, the current Tory front-runner for the job of mayor of London thinks that that is the responsibility of those ghastly people who he believes travel on public transport. The show-stopper among the reasons given has nothing to do with any of the Tory mayoral candidates. Apparently, one of the incidents was "no forward movement" on the train. I can see that that would be a significant problem on a tube train.

The figures contain further delays. Some 500 delays were due to staff being absent or not in position. Another 500 were due to train defects, and another 500 due to track circuit failure. If more evidence of a failing transport system were needed, Members should consider the quality-of-life indicators that have been released. They show that the number of journeys made by car continues to rise—hence, no doubt, the Government's U-turn on their commitment to reduce road traffic.

The Deputy Prime Minister has urged us to hold him to his pledges, and I am happy to repeat his statement of 6 June 1997—although he has since denied that he said it:

"I will have failed if, in five years time, there are not far fewer journeys made by car."

If the right hon. Gentleman survives the next few years in office, I and my colleagues will be happy to remind him of that pledge—which he repeated on 20 October 1998. I questioned him on the matter and he said:

"I agree to keep to that commitment: judge my performance in five years."—[*Official Report*, 20 October 1998; Vol. 317, c. 1071.]

The bad news is that we are judging him for his performance now, not in five years time.

Before I consider the Government's response to the problems, I shall briefly consider the Conservatives' policy on transport, and in particular on the tube. They have almost as many policies on the tube as they have mayoral candidates. Of course, that is less true as their candidates are disqualified, drop out or are not allowed to pass go. Official Conservative policy, as expressed in the motion that we are debating today, is to seek

"more private money in another way".

That is not very specific. Labour has the third way and the Tories have another way.

Little more information is offered in the Tories' common-sense revolution document, which promises a

"free share issue to Londoners".

The former Member for Epping Forest, Mr. Norris, was reported in the *Evening Standard* recently as favouring a plan to allow the Government to raise the money needed through the issuing of Treasury bonds. That sounds suspiciously like the proposals made by Susan Kramer, the Liberal Democrat's mayoral candidate.

The former candidate, Lord Archer, appeared to have a policy on everything except underground funding. However, it has been reported that the Conservatives expect him to pay for his mayoral election campaign—I wonder whether they also expect him to pay personally for improvements to London Underground. They certainly have not identified any other source of funding to provide the investment needed in the tube. Alas, we will never know what the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) would have done with the tube because she has already been blocked from standing, apparently because she is the only Tory mayoral candidate to support the official Tory policy on section 28.

The Conservatives are supposed to be an alternative government. They need to tell the House how they would raise the £7 billion needed to bring the tube up to scratch. How would they fund the long-term infrastructure development plan for the capital that the London chamber of commerce and industry has called for? We all know that the Tories would not recognise an integrated transport policy if they ran over it on one of their impediment-free roads.

It is time to move on to Labour. The public-private partnership is now two and a half years behind schedule, and it is unravelling. Labour's mayoral candidates are all off-message. Just three weeks ago, the Prime Minister claimed at Question Time that the bond issue in New York bankrupted the city and that a bond issue here would cost £150 per Londoner. On the same day, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) was quoted in the *Evening Standard* as saying:

"I would not rule out financing things by bonds for individual projects and schemes."

He also said:

"Any PPP approach will need to be tested to see if it is value for money compared to other ways of financing the system."

The Government have never answered the question about what would happen if the public sector comparator test revealed that the PPP would not be the best value. How many more years would we have to wait then for a proper transport system in London?

The right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras also spoke about Railtrack's involvement, and said:

"I am not wildly keen on them and I never have been."

Within six days, a press release from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions announced that Railtrack was no longer able to deliver the integration that it had promised.

Unfortunately, the Prime Minister is also a cylinder short of a V6 engine. [HON. MEMBERS: "What?"] It is a variation on an Australian saying, "a tinnie short of a six pack." Two weeks ago, at Question Time, the Prime Minister again rubbished the very proposals that the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras had said he was willing to consider. The Prime Minister also claimed that the Jubilee line extension was late because its construction was being carried out by the public sector. I have asked London Transport for a list of the contractors involved in construction of the Jubilee line extension and it makes interesting reading. I am sure that hon. Members will be familiar with some of the companies involved, which include Balfour Beatty, John Laing and Tarmac. Everyone knows that they are not public sector companies as the Prime Minister suggested: they are private sector companies. It is clear that the Prime Minister is as incoherent on this issue as his Deputy. The debate is about raising the finance for the underground, not who should be contracted to carry out the construction work.

We are consistently told by the Government that the PPP will be required to deliver best value for Londoners. That is a reasonable point to make and I am sure that all hon. Members would agree. However, every expert who has looked at that matter thinks that a bond issue is at least worthy of consideration. Last week, Maurice Fitzpatrick, head of economics at Chantrey Vellacott, said in a letter to the *Evening Standard*:

"The private sector investors will require their investment to be repaid to them, together with an interest rate return far higher than the Government would have paid, had it borrowed the money to invest directly in the tube . . . PPP is not a free lunch. On the contrary it is likely to prove far more expensive than if the Government had borrowed the money directly to build the tube."

The fact is that the risks that have to be accounted for in the private sector are inherently more costly than they would be for the public sector or, indeed, for a bonds issue.

The clear consensus now emerging in London is that the way to bring investment in London's tube is to keep the tube in public hands, where safety is best guaranteed, but to allow money to be raised through bonds, outside the constraints of the public sector borrowing requirement. That is what the Liberal Democrats have been saying for years, and that is what Susan Kramer—the Liberal Democrat candidate and an expert in the financing of transport infrastructure schemes—is saying. When the other parties eventually manage to select candidates, it is a scheme that they will end up accepting as providing the simplest and best value method of investing in the tube.

I welcome the fact that the Government have made the PricewaterhouseCoopers report available in the Library. However, it is a pity that the Deputy Prime Minister has chosen to make that public today instead of a few days ago, because it has been impossible to scrutinise the report before today's debate. Detailed scrutiny would have allowed hon. Members to compare the report's figures with the proposals made by Chantrey Vellacott and the London school of economics. We could have challenged certain assumptions that PricewaterhouseCoopers has made, including the interest rate to be used for the public sector bond issue and the £3 billion that is glibly included as efficiency savings from the PPP, to be achieved through innovation and incentives.

The Government's welcome openness about the PricewaterhouseCoopers report is not matched by openness about the tube task force that the Government set up in July to consider the tube. I asked the Government a written question about the activities of the task force in the past six months, and the response was not

[Mr. Brake]

very edifying. I was told that it had met once a month but had not produced any research. That was as much of a statement as the Government were prepared to make about the task force and its workings.

Taking part in a transport debate for the Liberal Democrats in this House is a great pleasure. The Tories' track record of under-investment in public transport confronts commuters every day in the form of cancelled trains, broken tracks, poor safety systems, a dilapidated tube network and congested roads.

The Labour Government, on the other hand, are full of good intentions and make all the right noises. However, I am sorry to say that the wheels keep falling off their transport policy. Railtrack's involvement in the London underground has jumped the tracks; the part-privatisation of NATS is hitting turbulence on the Back Benches; and U-turns have been performed on road traffic reduction commitments. The Government's transport policy would never pass its MOT.

To the Conservatives and to Labour, London's commuters say, "A plague o' both your houses!" It is time to make way for a party that understands the problems and has the solutions—the Liberal Democrats and Susan Kramer.

8.21 pm

Mr. Patrick Hall (Bedford): I am pleased to participate in this important debate, which has been colourful, varied, and notable for a second maiden speech from the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo). We have also heard something from the hustings for the London mayoral election; in addition there has been the introduction, by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), of vomit into the discussion.

However, the most notable revelation came from my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) who, even before the Freedom of Information Bill is enacted, confessed that he spends his time at home reading *Horse and Hound*. I suppose that that magazine is connected with transport in some way.

Mr. Mackinlay: We read little else in Tilbury.

Mr. Hall: One of the key political differences between Britain and the other European Union countries over the past 20 or 30 years has been the way in which transport here has become a deeply ideological issue. In the rest of Europe, in contrast, a consensus between the parties has existed for years. That consensus has not been a weakness, nor has it caused European transport to remain unchanged. In fact, it has led to the sustained improvement of, and investment in, public transport by road and rail throughout the continent. As a result, European economies have been much more stable and have performed more strongly than our economy.

It is widely understood in Europe that a national and international consensus on transport matters can bring great benefits to the economy, the environment and the quality of life. None of the progress made in that regard in Europe has ever been considered to be anti-car. That is demonstrated by the fact that, although car ownership is higher in Europe than in Britain, people use their cars less. That is because viable public transport alternatives are available in Europe in a way that is not true of this country.

Britain has suffered badly from the lack of that consensus. Our economy has been the weaker for it. People are stuck for hours in traffic jams. Trains are not comfortable: there is standing room only at peak hours, when carriages are like sardine cans even for people with seats. In addition, increasing pollution affects the health of people young and old, especially in certain parts of our cities.

The cause of the lack of consensus is obvious, and it lies entirely with the Conservative party that emerged from the 1979 general election. As Thatcherism became more confident and entrenched, the prejudice against the public sector and public planning extended to transport policy. There was an obsession with boosting individual car ownership, while at the same time public investment in rail and buses was run down.

An example of the deep harm that that caused our country can be found in the Bedford and Kempston area. The southern bypass at Bedford opened in 1996. That was under the previous Government, and I am grateful. However, the bypass crosses the track bed of the former Bedford to Cambridge railway line at one point, and it does so 1 m too low to allow trains to use the track bed.

The problem was raised when the road was designed, and it was mentioned in the local public inquiry. However, it was dismissed, as the well-established view in Government circles at the time was that rail had no future. It was said that there was no chance that that track bed would ever be needed again.

Three years after the bypass was opened, we have the east-west rail link scheme, a costed and viable plan to reopen and rebuild railway lines. The link will connect the east and west coasts of the country and will run from Bristol through Swindon, Milton Keynes, Bedford and Cambridge to Norwich and Ipswich. It will need to go under the section of the Bedford bypass that was built 1 m too low to allow trains through.

The problem can be overcome in a number of ways. The railway line could go over the bypass, which would be extremely expensive and environmentally damaging. The bypass could be propped up by a metre or so—an incredible but possible engineering exercise—or engineers could cut deeper underneath the road. However, the land around is a flood plain, so pumping facilities would be needed. Whatever course is adopted, extra delay and public expense will be incurred. That will be due entirely to the short-term thinking and entrenched anti-rail prejudice of the previous Government.

It is ironic to note that, even as the Bedford southern bypass was being opened in 1996, the then Government were already changing their approach to transport. Even then, they recognised that one cannot build one's way out of congestion. After 16 years of Conservative Government, it seemed that the sensible consensus on transport matters evident in Europe might be achieved here.

The result of the last general election might have reinforced that change, as the Conservatives appeared to have learned that the British people were not impressed with the lack of consensus. However, the Opposition motion before us today makes it clear that the Conservative party believes not at all in consensus.

The attitude displayed by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), and the policies—if that is what they can be called—set out by other Conservative Members reveal that consensus is the last thing that the Conservatives want.

Even within the Conservative party, there is no consensus. There are sensible Conservative voices in Parliament and in local councils around the country who want to engage in constructive debate about transport matters and about what is best for the future. That should benefit all of us, but it is not the Opposition's attitude. The Conservative party's cheap populism reveals that it has little to offer.

That is not what my constituents want. People in Bedford and Kempston want such matters to be tackled properly, and are happy for Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour supporters to engage in the process. People want to be able to use their cars, but not necessarily for every journey. They support the building of bypasses where they are of local benefit. I have mentioned the Bedford southern bypass, but there is also support for the programmed Bedford western bypass, the Clapham bypass on the A428 link and the Great Barford bypass.

There is support in my constituency for park-and-ride schemes, which have just started in the Bedford area; for a southern parkway station, and possibly a northern one; and for investment on the midland main line at Bedford station. Some has already been made, and I am pleased about that. There is also support for the east-west rail project going through Bedford, as I have just mentioned, and for proper bus-rail interchange facilities and through ticketing. Those facilities do not yet exist in Bedford but they should and could—however, I am disappointed at progress on that project.

The Government genuinely back all modes of transport—walking, cycling, driving, buses, taxis, trains, ships and planes. All those factors are necessary if we are to work together, where appropriate, to contribute to the strength of the economy, respect the environment and create a better quality of life for all of us. That is what government, of whatever political complexion, should be about. That is what this Government are about. Any political party that wishes to serve the country and contribute to the common good wants that. However, it is clear from the Opposition motion that such a consensual approach is the last thing that the Conservative party is capable of providing.

8.32 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I have much enjoyed listening to the debate. It has become clear that, despite the establishment of the Strategic Rail Authority, nothing can rescue the authority of the Deputy Prime Minister. As the confusion at the heart of his policies has become clearer, the right hon. Gentleman has performed more U-turns than a rickshaw driver in a traffic jam in Delhi. He speaks of his hopes for British transport when it is clear that he is responsible for a hoax on transport policy in London. His so-called public-private partnership is not the third way but the third-rate way, offering the worst possible value to Londoners and to taxpayers. It has happened because neither the right hon. Gentleman nor his Government colleagues can bring themselves to admit the dynamism, foresight and success of Conservative transport policy in recent years.

It is a fact that, since privatisation, not only the numbers of people using public transport, but the share of transport undertaken by the public sector, has increased. That is a reversal of 40 years of secular decline in the share of journeys taken for both private and freight purposes.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Among the many successes of the previous Government that the hon. Gentleman is about to list, does he rate their valuation of Railtrack at £1.9 billion, compared with the current value of £8 billion, as a fraud on the British taxpayer?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, because it was the Labour party's virulent attack and its threat of renationalisation when it came to power that depressed the value of the shares when they were sold. The irresponsible attitude of the Secretary of State for International Development—then Labour's transport spokeswoman—forced the Conservative Government to put a warning on the front of the prospectus. Labour's irresponsibility resulted in a massive loss of taxpayers' money. When the Government came to power, of course, they had to do a U-turn and confront the reality that renationalisation simply was not an option.

I shall happily give way to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) in the hope that his intervention will be more inspiring than the last.

Mr. Brake: And the ROSCOs?

Mr. St. Aubyn: We could enter into a lengthy debate about the previous Government's transport policy. My purpose, however, is to remind the House that the Opposition's detailed and well-thought-out motion urges the Deputy Prime Minister

"to follow planning policies which lessen the North South divide rather than worsen it, and which will encourage more people to live near town centres and their points of access to trains and buses rather than on greenfield developments".

In Guildford, that aspect of the policies pursued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is of the greatest concern.

I shall speak on two issues: the density of housing development on brownfield sites, on which subject I am happy to remind the House of my declaration in the Register of Members' Interests, which is available to all who wish to see it; and the seismic change that will happen in patterns of transport use as a result of the new technologies and new ways of doing things that we debated last week and shall debate again in times to come.

The Housebuilders Federation believes that it will be necessary to build 1.5 million homes in the south-east alone over the next 15 years or so. That would be the equivalent of building a town the size of Guildford in the south-east every six months. Advisers to the Government have been allowed to perpetrate and promote that staggering threat at the expense of constituents and of people in both north and south.

Mr. Patrick Hall: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I should like to develop my theme first.

At the same time as we in the south are being threatened with the devastation of our green fields, we read that housing developments are being knocked down

[Mr. St. Aubyn]

and erased by housing associations in northern cities in order to create some value in the remaining housing stock. This is no social trend, but a mass migration from the north to the south of our country because of the woeful imbalance in the economic policies pursued by the new Government. That migration lies at the heart of the threat to our green fields.

We must consider the density of developments. We have all heard horror stories about high-rise developments in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. We all know of the alienation felt by those who lived on those estates. I represented a part of Paddington that had its fair share of high-rise blocks when I was a local councillor, and I can testify to the poor design of some projects.

We also know that high-rise building has been successful in some parts of the United Kingdom and in other parts of the world. Naturally, it appeals to some single households, of which, we are told, there will be many more in the decades to come. In London's docklands, or in New York or many other places, high-rise developments integrate the living requirements of residents with their need for services, shopping and transport. The key to increasing brownfield development in both south and north is to find imaginative ways by which the density of development can be increased.

The hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) was my representative on the Greater London council when I was a councillor in Paddington. Indeed, his election had a dramatic effect on our share of the vote, which shot up a year later when Londoners realised what they had voted for. God forbid that they should vote for him again, but the Livingstone effect would undoubtedly work to our advantage once more. None the less, the hon. Gentleman made the valid point that bond finance is an alternative to outright sale of the tube or other transport assets to private finance.

When I went to the United States with the members of the Select Committee on Education and Employment, I was invited by Brett Schundler, the republican mayor of Jersey City, to visit a bond-funded project. Bonds are not a left-wing measure; they are successfully used by right-wing Governments. In Jersey City, the imaginative use of bond finance rescued that city from financial disaster and has regenerated it, under the guidance of the first Republican mayor for 60 years, who is now in his third full term of office.

I mention that example as our objection to bond finance for the tube is because we need the dynamism, imagination and innovation that the private sector can bring to the difficult problem of transport in London, as it is attempting to do for the problems with our trains and buses elsewhere. Indeed, no one objects to the fact that our buses and trains are built by the private sector. In my constituency, the excellent firm, Dennis buses, has been at the forefront of new developments in bus design.

In a rather tasteless contribution—there was one valid point—the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington complained about the poor quality of public transport. If people's perceptions of public transport are that it is so down market, those who might use it will refuse to do so. There are new designs for coaches and buses; for example, Dennis buses has designed a bus that kneels at the kerb so that those who are disabled, or who are carrying shopping or wheeling children in buggies, can more easily get into the bus. Such conscious developments to benefit the users of public transport will promote the idea of its use to a wider market.

In my constituency, a consultancy has developed monorail plans for hundreds of towns and cities. The advantage of modern monorail systems—if they can be successfully introduced—is that the cost of the infrastructure is much lower than that of traditional rail systems. The payback and the cost are among the major attractions of monorail. Furthermore, it has been proved that the modern image and visibility of the monorail attracts more users to such services.

E-commerce also has an effect on transport. In Guildford, our local Tesco allows people to order their weekly shopping on the web and the goods are delivered to their door. That is a return to the local grocery shop concept that was so prevalent decades ago. That type of innovation will reduce traffic. If one van makes deliveries throughout a housing estate, that is much more efficient and requires less road use than if everyone on the estate drove to the local supermarket. We can project to a time when those out-of-town superstores will simply become warehouses and delivery points from which the essentials of daily living can be delivered to the residents of our towns and cities.

We have to consider what will happen to town centres. They are, of course, attractive places in which to live. The social aspects—the shops, cafés, places to browse for a book—are attractive; we can look forward to the revival of our town centres and inner cities as meeting points. In the process, we shall see a reversal of the trend to the countryside on which the predictions for increased housing in the south-east have been founded.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Does my hon. Friend agree that there are hundreds of thousands of small market towns where, at 5 o'clock, everybody disappears because nobody lives above the shops? If we could encourage people back to live in those town centres, there would be less need for commuting and less traffic congestion. The situation would be greatly improved. Does he have any ideas as to how we might develop such a system?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am interested in my hon. Friend's comments. I am sure that the same is true in the Cotswolds as it is in Surrey. We need to encourage more people to live in our town and city centres. That is partly an issue of security. With proper systems of closed circuit television and effective policing, we can ensure people's safety in such areas, and that will make them attractive places in which to live.

Above all, we need sound transport links. I shall mention a final example. Recently, the frequency of the service from Guildford to London was increased from three to four fast trains an hour. Our connections with the centre of London are a valuable component in persuading more people to live in the centre of Guildford.

The examples that I have mentioned do not form one strategic transport policy. They are the result of a range of policies implemented by a range of bodies in the private as well as the public sector. They recognise that diverse opportunities exist and that no single Department—and, I am afraid, certainly not this Deputy Prime Minister—can understand what is going on and can

direct what should happen to transport from the top down. That is a doomed policy and we must move away from it as soon as possible.

8.45 pm

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): This debate has been quite fascinating, with a few unfascinating gaps in it from time to time. When I came to the Chamber this afternoon, I thought that there would be, from what I have read in the media, an onslaught on the Deputy Prime Minister and that he would be challenged by the Opposition. There was nothing of the sort.

My heart went out to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who is clearly not well. His constituency neighbours mine, and we often come into contact with each other. I am sorry that he is not feeling well, and I know that his constituents will be, too. He is a very effective constituency Member of Parliament.

I had hoped to hear something positive and constructive from the right hon. Gentleman. Conservative Members say that they have a different view from the Government's on how transport should be dealt with and they say that the Government are doing it all wrong. What would they do? We did not hear anything about that. They are on the road to nowhere.

It is very difficult to hold a debate with Conservative Members. They did not offer anything. They merely said, "Don't do it that way." However, I do not think that even they would suggest that we do nothing and not bother about the problems of increasing congestion on the roads, increasing pollution and an increasing incidence of childhood asthma.

In my constituency, there is much commuting out to London by train and much commuting in from several places in the area, and almost all of that is by car. That gives us a congestion problem only at the morning peak hour. Several solutions and strategies have been suggested, but there is not just one answer to the problems of congestion and pollution. We cannot say, "Do this: bring in congestion charging and workplace parking charging and everything will be fine." It will not be; we need a series of strategies.

If we face congestion problems only at the morning peak hour, that is when we need to take measures. For the rest of the day, we do not need to restrict people's choice. At present, people have too little choice about how they make their journeys. I would like my constituents to be able sometimes to drive into central London, but that is impossible. They go by train, because that is their only choice. Sometimes, I would like them to be able to drive to the theatre or wherever, but they cannot do that either. I would like people to be able to take the bus most of the time, but sometimes to be able to drive if they have heavy things to carry. People do not have that choice.

The Conservative party describes itself as the party of individual freedom and choice, but its policies over 18 years took that choice away. It does not matter whether people have a car or whether they like to drive a car, choices are limited if they are stuck in traffic or cannot make the journeys that they want to make, at the time and with the convenience they want.

I should like to ask one thing of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, if some of our towns and cities are to have congestion charging. My local authority is bidding for pilot status for that scheme, and I commend it for doing so, because it has shown that it wants to take serious action rather than just wringing its hands and blaming the Government. I should like local authorities that are prepared to take that action to be supported.

One way to resolve the problem of the necessity to have visible improvements in public transport before people use their cars less is to set up partnerships between local authorities and other bodies, possibly in the private sector. I hope that the Deputy Prime Minister will give some thought to supporting local authorities that are willing to take the necessary action.

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to speak today.

8.50 pm

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate, and a particular pleasure to speak in the same debate as my new right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), who spoke well and clearly and made penetrating points. I thought that the speech by the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) was lamentable. It was not only bovine and oafish; it was incorrect, and no apology followed.

I want briefly to address planning. I have been here since 2.30 pm, apart from slipping out briefly for something to eat, and nobody has yet spoken about rural areas. The Government have, in many ways, declared war on rural areas, not only by shifting £500 million of central Government funding to inner cities but by coming up with their extraordinary plans to impose excessive numbers of new houses on rural areas without considering whether the necessary government services already exist or what will obviously be the consequences for the environment and transport.

It is proposed to impose 36,000 new houses on Shropshire when indigenous growth requires only 18,000. No one can possibly suggest opposing the building of houses to cope with indigenous growth but, when every single publicly funded service in Shropshire, including education, fire and police, is suffering from underfunding, and when there is a £94 million backlog of expenditure on the roads, it does not seem common sense to build twice the number of houses that are needed.

Mr. Mackinlay: Both parties have got their policy for the south-east of England wrong—the area is on overload. I was listening to the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), who was complaining about the inexorable growth in housebuilding in the south-east. As far as I am aware, Shropshire is not in the south-east. We cannot have it both ways. We have to meet housing need, and a constituency such as North Shropshire could help to spread much more equitably the load caused by the demand for residential properties. From a planning point of view, it would be better if housebuilding were absorbed by such constituencies, taking the pressure off the south-east of England.

Mr. Paterson: I am most grateful for that intervention because it demonstrates the problem that we are up against, which is central planning, similar to Gosplan, by civil servants, mainly in the south of England, who do not understand local circumstances elsewhere.

[Mr. Paterson]

The Government have set an admirable target of 60 per cent. of new houses being built on brownfield sites. Even if we include Telford, which is the main urban area in Shropshire, only 40 per cent. of houses could be built on such sites. That figure comes from the county council and the Council for the Protection of Rural England. The figure for Wolverhampton is about 93 per cent., and the figure for the whole midlands conurbation is about 73 per cent. What is the point of bringing people out of conurbations to small market towns in Shropshire so that they have to drive back to the conurbations to their jobs?

That brings me on to the congestion legislation—the parking tax. That is a pure tax on my poorest constituents. In Shropshire, 67 per cent. of people in Shropshire drive to work in towns such as Telford, Wrexham and Newcastle-under-Lyme, each of which has its own local authority. Parking or congestion charges must be significant. The Leicester experiment demonstrated that charges must be £10 if people are to be persuaded to leave their car behind and get the bus. If people in Shropshire pay those charges, the revenue will benefit transport services not in the Oswestry district or the North Shropshire district, but in those smaller urban authorities.

This is a straight hit on my poorest constituents, as is the iniquitous increase in petrol prices. Over the past few weeks, my constituents have seen the price of petrol sail from £3.50 a gallon; it is heading on to £3.60 to £3.70. The Government have been caught out something rotten, because the price of oil has increased from $10 a barrel to about $25, and that cannot be hidden. The last thing people can afford to lose is the use of their cars, because with that they lose their jobs. That is why the intervention of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) was most helpful. It is not sensible to move people out to towns when they have to drive back to other towns where they have jobs.

Mr. Mackinlay: So where do we put them?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. If hon. Members wish to make interventions, they must rise and make them in the conventional way.

Mr. Mackinlay: I am extremely sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

When Members advance the argument that is being put forward by the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson), they must offer a solution. Where are we going to put folk? The quality of housebuilding and the quality of life to be found in Shropshire are most attractive and if taken up will help to stop the gravitational pull to the south-east of England, which is unhealthy both economically and socially. Housebuilding in Shropshire is an extremely good idea.

Mr. Paterson: I have explained to the hon. Gentleman that we do not have brownfield sites. Telford, for instance, can provide only 40 per cent. of such sites. Why move people out from Wolverhampton, where 93 per cent. brownfield-site building is possible? Is it not more sensible to build there? There is no point in driving up to Shropshire at night and then returning the next day to one's work.

Having touched briefly on the problem of fuel duties for my constituents who have cars, and who have been hit by a £900 a year increase in tax since the Government came to power, I move on to the appalling damage that is being done to road haulage, England's main strategic haulage industry is responsible for moving 95 per cent. of Britain's goods. Even if rail investment is doubled, the percentage of goods carried by the main industry will decline to only 90. I raised the issue in an Adjournment debate in November, and I hate to say that all my worst predictions are coming true.

We now have easily the most expensive fuel in western Europe. The Minister is bound to say in his reply that the Conservatives introduced the fuel escalator. We did so when there were only two other countries in Europe with cheaper fuel. The price of fuel in this country is more than twice as much as it is in Spain. It is about 92 per cent. more than the price in Luxembourg. Those are two of our main competitor countries. That is almost entirely the result of the duty. We know that 85 per cent. of the price of diesel is attributable to tax. If we take the average price per litre, duty amounts to 47.4p in this country as against 2[illegible]3p in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. This is an entirely counter-productive measure which will not improve the environment.

The figures produced by the Library show that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of foreign-owned trucks since the escalator was increased so sharply. In 1997, United Kingdom trucks made 543,000 movements to mainland Europe. Over the past four quarters, up to the second quarter of 1999, that increased to 558,000. However, movements by foreign-owned trucks have leapt from 597,600 to 804,900 in the same period. It is not surprising that they are mainly trucks from France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, where there are far more sensible fuel duty regimes.

Vehicle excise duty has been increased to an incredible £5,750 for a 40-tonne truck in this country, whereas it is £486 in France and £328 in Spain. This has put our truckers at a massive disadvantage, with catastrophic consequences for the industry. However hard one tries to explain the problem, the Government do not understand that there is no environmental gain. The Library figures show that, in 1990, 159 million tonnes of carbon were produced in this country, of which 30 million came from road transport. Freight produced only 16 per cent. Only 5 million tonnes of carbon were produced by the road haulage industry. The Government, however, intend to halve that as part of the national reduction. It is simply unattainable: it will not happen. The load must be carried—95 per cent. of freight must go by road. If the domestic supplier is too expensive, a company will move to a foreign-owned trucker. It is as simple as that. The load must be moved, regardless. There is no option of going by rail, particularly in rural areas.

I had a fax today on the subject of rural transport from Mr. W. M. Griffiths, who runs a successful agricultural distribution company near Ellesmere. He states:

"Fuel costs are one of the major items that affect all sectors of agriculture. No items consumed on farms and produced by farms are untouched by the cost of fuel. The abolition of the fuel escalator is a belated effort to help beleaguered agriculture and its dependent industries. A retrospective rebate would be a welcome move to help reduce the ever-increasing cost of transport, especially in the rural areas."

I rang another of my constituents who was in his cab—I am pleased to say that he pulled his truck on to the side of the road—and he sent me his comments. He is Mr. David Yarwood, of Greyroads Ltd. in Oswestry. He writes:

"Every week I hear of yet more haulage companies and owner-drivers throwing in the towel, either by liquidation or foreclosure by their banks. Fuel companies are now reluctant to supply hauliers due to the high risk of them not receiving payment. Fuel companies who supply us are insisting on prompt payment and in some cases even C.O.D.

Over the last 20 years my Company and other hauliers stepped in to carry vital coal deliveries. During both the Rail and Miners' Strikes, we kept the home fires burning, Power Stations going and Hospitals open. We weren't very popular with some people but we were dedicated to our Country."

I think that that is at the bottom of the Government's policy. There is no gain to the economy, there is a cost to gross domestic product and to the balance of payments, there is a cost in employment, and there is a cost to every single business in the country. The only explanation is that the policy is a dirty old bone being thrown to old Labour as revenge for what the hauliers did during the miners strike.

9.2 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Tonight's debate was called by the Opposition. We might have expected to hear a recognition of the problems that their sad and disastrous 18 years in office created for public transport, and we might have hoped for some apology. We might have expected to hear some solutions to the legacy of decline and destruction that they left. Instead, they seem to have short memories. They remember little of what they did.

The recent speeches from Opposition Members seem deliberately to ignore their record on public transport. By speaking about other issues, they try to divert our attention from what they did. Having initiated the debate, Opposition Members must listen to what we have to say about the result of their disastrous transport policies and what can now be done.

After all, the country cannot and will not forget that it was the previous Government, ideologically driven by distaste for, and dislike of, everything public, and in particular public influence over public transport, who increased congestion on our roads by increasing the number of cars from 70 per mile to 100 per mile. As a result, the CBI estimated that about £15 billion was being charged to our economy because of congestion costs.

The Conservative Government deregulated buses, notably outside London, which resulted in a passenger loss of at least one third and an increase in fares. It was local authorities—mainly Labour local authorities—that came to the rescue of people who needed buses to get to work and to go out at times of the day and night that did not make profits for the commercial concerns. Particularly in rural areas, local authorities—again, mainly Labour ones—ensured that bus services survived. While deregulation was under way, I had the privilege of leading Lancashire county council. That Labour-controlled county council kept rural bus services alive, encouraging diversity and experimentation with community-based, publicly subsidised rural services.

Through their public transport policies, the previous Government did more and more environmental damage. For example, they presided over an increase to 66 per cent. of freight carried on our roads and a fall in freight journeys by rail to 5 per cent.

The previous Government's public transport policy virtually destroyed our rail service, cutting it into 100 pieces, with disastrous results. Indeed, hon. Friends have referred to the loss of public funds through the virtual giveaway of public assets, such as rolling stock companies, which has been condemned by the Conservative-chaired Public Accounts Committee. Railtrack, as we know, was sold for £1.9 billion, but is now valued at £8 billion.

I must admit to being bemused every time that I hear a Conservative Member condemn Labour for taxes on motorists. It was the previous Government who increased duty on fuel from 7p a litre to 42p a litre, and it was under their rule that taxes on motorists rose from £4 billion to £21 billion.

Mr. Paterson: I remind the hon. Lady again that we introduced the escalator when oil prices were much lower and when only two other countries in Europe had cheaper fuel. Our fuel is now easily the most expensive in western Europe—twice as expensive as in Spain and three times as expensive as in Turkey.

Mrs. Ellman: I am very interested to note that the hon. Gentleman did not deny what I said. Indeed, he reaffirmed it. I hope that he remembers that this Government have stopped the automatic fuel escalator and will ensure that any funds raised from it will go to improving road transport. Not one penny of revenue from his Government's policies did so.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Is my hon. Friend interested to know that, under the Conservatives and their escalator, the tax per litre of petrol rose from 7p to 42p? Does not the intervention of the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) therefore seem a little odd?

Mrs. Ellman: I accept my hon. Friend's comments. I note that Opposition Members have nothing whatever to say about such an important subject, which is very strange. Instead, they condemn this Government, who have done far less in attacking any motorist than they did during their long and despicable period in office.

Public transport is of course of great importance to communities and societies; it is important for individuals to be able to move where they wish for work and leisure. Public transport is also important for economic development. I remind Opposition Members, who so foolishly instigated this debate, that they failed to deliver the channel tunnel rail link, and that this Government rescued it by a much more imaginative use of public and private funding, saving the taxpayer more than £1.2 billion in the process.

It is of great importance to note that the public transport policy pursued by the previous Government failed to secure investment in all our regions. I listened with interest to the important contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), who played a large part in the campaign for investment in the west coast main line. It was an excellent campaign that was conducted on an all-party basis, and brought together local

[Mrs. Ellman]

authority and private sector interests. Sadly, it was defeated by privatisation. The Government must move forward and try to ensure that investment is made in our regions, including in the west coast main line. If public transport is to play a proper part in developing our economy, it must be based on the interests of people and regions; it cannot be based on short-term financial interest alone.

In my constituency in Liverpool, we have great opportunities for economic development through the expanding trade at the port of Liverpool. Opportunities for trade with Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are increasing. That trade can be developed properly to bring full benefit to people across the north-west and, indeed, the northern region only if there is more investment in our dock infrastructure. We also need more investment in our rail services so that transport can be linked with the development of new economic opportunities by moving goods in an environmentally friendly way to the east coast ports and across to northern Europe. We need to invest in that trans-European route so that we can improve the economy and the environment simultaneously. The previous Government ignored that sort of policy because they were concerned not with the public interest, but with short-term, private gain. Such an attitude failed our region as it failed our country.

As the Opposition initiated the debate, we are entitled to ask whether they have learned by their mistakes. They had little to say about what was wrong. Several Opposition Members spoke about the importance of linking transport and the environment; some referred to the importance of considering employment in relation to transport. The Government have, for the first time, introduced a structured process—in which everyone can participate—for achieving that through regional economic strategies that have been put forward by the regional development agencies set up throughout England.

The Opposition not only opposed devising regional economic strategies, but are pledged to abolish the regional development agencies, which have produced the means for creating those strategies. They have learned nothing. They understand the importance of linking transport with the environment and the economy, but oppose the way in which that is being addressed.

Mr. Davies: I do not know whether my hon. Friend is aware of an article in today's edition of the *Financial Times*, which reported that the chair of a regional development agency said that, with an extra £250 million, those agencies could generate an extra £2.4 billion of tax through the extra economic growth that they could create. Will she join me in underlining the importance of regional development agencies for regional regeneration and to the north-south issues about which we all know?

Mrs. Ellman: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. Regional development agencies are essential for bringing together the private, public and voluntary sectors to examine the economic, environmental and transport needs of regions. That is the way in which sustainable, new employment can be developed to fulfil the differing needs of the different regions.

I also note with regret that the Opposition are still against the creation of a Strategic Rail Authority, which they oppose in its shadow form. It is the Government's attempt to start to readdress the issue—indeed, the concept—of public transport working in the interests of the country and its regions.

Many of my hon. Friends have drawn attention to the Government's achievements in ensuring that there has been more investment over the past two years in rail, buses and the movement of freight from the roads on to rail. The Government should also be praised for their other transport policies and for being the first Administration for many years to address the decline in our Merchant Navy. The agreement on a tonnage tax is the first step in the attempt to revive British shipping and our Merchant Navy and we must ensure that, alongside the expansion in British shipping, there is an expansion in ratings' jobs, the development of which is being prevented by the international exploitation of labour. We must address that important issue.

The development of regional air services is another policy for which the Government should be praised. I welcome the additional investment in Liverpool airport, which is helping to boost the Merseyside economy, and look forward to it being linked with investment in Manchester as part of north-west economic development.

The Opposition initiated tonight's debate on transport, but it has failed to live up to the expectations that they tried to fuel. They promised us fireworks, but have produced a damp squib. I can only hope that they learn from the errors made tonight and in 18 years of running down public transport. I hope that they will join Labour Members in supporting our new Transport Bill and promoting and supporting public transport, in the interests of the public and the country.

9.17 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): The debate has certainly brought the Chamber to life in a way that the Government frequently find uncomfortable. I have listened to many interesting contributions.

Mr. Mackinlay: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jenkin: If I may, I shall make a little progress. The hon. Gentleman is rapidly becoming the jack-in-the-box of the House. He frequently makes interventions from where he sits, and that is where I shall leave him for the moment.

There have been many interesting contributions; I regret that I was absent for some and shall study *Hansard* carefully. Interestingly, there have been pleas from both sides of the House for road schemes, bypasses and traffic relief schemes. That speaks volumes about the state of the Government's transport policy, but the collapse of their so-called public-private partnership for the London underground prompted us to initiate the debate. The events of the past week are symptomatic of much wider failure: if their transport policy had been an outstanding success, I doubt that we would have had to initiate the debate, nor would the Deputy Prime Minister have had to cut short his visit to India and fly back home amidst an atmosphere of crisis.

The Deputy Prime Minister finds himself floundering because his transport policy is fundamentally misconceived. An increase in state control at the expense of the ordinary citizen in general and increased

restrictions and taxation on the motorist in particular are the essence of Government policy and the root cause of their failure.

Mr. Geraint Davies: How can the hon. Gentleman reconcile his comments about extra bypasses—the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) mentioned 100 bypasses and new road developments that we have cut—with cuts in taxation for the motorist? How can he square that circle given the comments in "The Common Sense Revolution" on reducing tax?

Mr. Jenkin: How does the hon. Gentleman square the rapid increase of taxation on the motorist and the £40 billion of tax increases that the Government have inflicted on the British people with the cuts in transport spending and roads investment? The hon. Gentleman has more explaining to do than I do.

Transport is about freedom and prosperity. The freedom for individuals and families to travel is one of the most fundamental rights of a free society. That is why the car is just about the most successful and sought-after of all modern inventions. The car has become an icon of personal and family freedom and independence, yet the Government have launched the most astonishing attack on millions of ordinary people for whom the car is not a luxury but a necessity.

I do not know why the Deputy Prime Minister much of the time looks so bewildered by people's reaction. *[Interruption.]* Before the election, the Prime Minister promised that there would be no need to increase taxes. Under Labour, after three tax-raising Budgets, Britain now has by far the highest petrol taxes in Europe: more than 85p in the pound is tax. Although the Chancellor says that he has stopped the automatic Budget increases in petrol and diesel tax, those taxes will still go up. Table B9 in the pre-Budget statement shows an increase in fuel duties well above the rate of inflation. All the Chancellor has done is to replace the fuel duty escalator with a new stealth tax escalator. *[Interruption.]* His spin last month was just another chapter in the great Labour lie.

Mr. Paterson: The Deputy Prime Minister has just made a sedentary comment about it being a Tory tax. Will my hon. Friend ask him to look at the Government's figures, which clearly show that fuel duties will increase from £21.6 billion to £23.5 billion? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Jenkin: I have asked the Deputy Prime Minister written questions about this issue, but he passes them to his right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and we do not get an answer. The Government will not say how much of that increase will be for the DETR, and there will be further increases in fuel taxes at the next Budget.

The Transport Bill imposes yet more taxes on car drives—car-parking and congestion taxes. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Could we please have an end to interventions from a sedentary position by Back Benchers and Front Benchers?

Mr. Jenkin: What is the point of these tax increases? Before the election, Labour's election website promised

"to reduce and then reverse traffic growth".

That was just another part of the great Labour lie to satisfy the green lobby. If the Deputy Prime Minister really wanted to do something positive to slow down traffic growth, he would stop new housing developments sprawling across the green fields of England and concentrate development near, and within, towns where people can choose to use public transport, cycle or walk instead of taking the car. That point was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn).

The truth is that taxes do not stop pollution or reduce congestion, except by forcing the very poorest drivers off the road. The latest traffic figures published by the DETR early in November show that congestion and traffic are growing as fast as ever.

The freedom for business and industry to transport their goods and to provide services to a wide range of customers is essential to the well-being of the economy. That is why the Government's stealth tax assault on the road haulage industry, which employs more than 1 million people, is such a disaster. The highest haulage taxes in Europe do not mean fewer lorries on the road: just fewer British lorries. Foreign-registered trucks on UK roads increased by 31 per cent. last year. My hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) pointed out the disastrous effects.

People and businesses make millions of individual transport choices every day. A successful transport policy must provide for those choices. Freedom of choice is not just another new Labour slogan to be wheeled out to placate public opinion. The only transport policies that will succeed are those that meet the genuine needs and aspirations of consumers.

That is why privatisation is the common-sense solution—*[Interruption.]* I have enjoyed hearing the litany of propaganda that has issued from Labour Members during the debate. However, the fact is, that, after 50 years of decline in passenger miles on the railway when it was owned and operated by the state, it is privatisation that has finally reversed that decline. In only three years—the three years that have elapsed since the release of the railway from the shackles of state control—passenger volumes have increased by 25 per cent. That is because it is the job of managers and staff on the privatised railway not to please the politicians, but to put more bums on seats in order to turn an honest profit for the shareholders.

The railway still has many failings, but it is privatisation and the profit motive that the Deputy Prime Minister still so despises that is delivering what the right hon. Gentleman actually wants. It is producing huge new investment, and causing people to get out of their cars and on to trains according to their own free choice.

We are in favour of integration, but not as part of another slick Labour slogan that pretends to offer easy answers. No one should deny that transport is an easy challenge, but it was the Labour party that promised before the last election that it would fix everything quickly. The only integration that will work is integration that is customer-led. For instance, Anglia Railways in my constituency offers single bus and train tickets enabling people to get on a bus, get on a train and go to Stansted airport. Those tickets were not invented by some Minister or civil servant in Whitehall.

The state can never hope to provide for such a huge, complex and diverse market, whether by direct provision or by way of some kind of master plan for transport.

[Mr. Jenkin]

If too many decisions are made in town halls and Whitehall, choices are removed from ordinary people, and that is why Britain under Labour is grinding to a halt.

The Deputy Prime Minister glibly promised an integrated transport policy; he has delivered a standstill Britain. Before the election, Labour policy documents promised to deliver what they called immediate benefits for the travelling public, but the most fundamental weakness in the right hon. Gentleman's strategy is his neglect of roads. The latest national roads maintenance conditions survey shows that our roads are in the worst condition in which they have been since the last Labour Government, and that the United Kingdom is now investing less in roads than any of our major European competitors. Britain is at the bottom of the roads spending league.

What really takes the breath away is the right hon. Gentleman's hapless public- private partnerships for public transport. Before the election, the present Prime Minister attacked the Conservative party thus:

"the Government cast around for any hapless part of the public sector to privatise. Air traffic control is floated as a possibility".—[*Official Report*, 16 November 1994; Vol. 250, c. 15.]

That notion was described as crazy, but, last week, the Deputy Prime Minister introduced a Bill including provision for the privatisation of air traffic control. There could never be a more glaring example of Labour saying one thing and doing precisely the opposite.

This is no ordinary privatisation. It is not at all clear how, in this privatisation, the management of NATS will not live in permanent fear of Ministers if the Government remain much the biggest shareholder. It is far from clear how issues of national security can be resolved if control is sold to a foreign bidder. Can the right hon. Gentleman explain how he manages to raise so little for investment from the sale? I note that his antics on the railway have helped to halve Railtrack's share price, but to raise only £15 million in net proceeds from the sale of a business that is valued at £800 million suggests an unparalleled degree of commercial incompetence. It is quite simple: the figures relating to the financial and manpower effects of the Bill are given in the notes on clauses. I do not know whether the Secretary of State had the chance to read them on the aeroplane.

Mr. Prescott: I read them before I came back.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I will not have comments from a sedentary position, even from those on the Front Bench.

Mr. Jenkin: The notes say that income from the partial sale of NATS to a strategic partner could raise about £350 million. There are outstanding debts of £300 million to be paid. The costs and fees for the deal will be £35 million, so net proceeds will be £15 million. If that is value for money, the Secretary of State has a rather different view from me.

The chaos of the tube public-private partnership underlines that the Secretary of State cannot cope with the demands of his Department. The PPP was to be his pride and joy. It was to demonstrate that the third way is the new hope for new Labour, but it has turned to dust and ashes.

I listened with great interest to the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), ex-leader of the loony left Camden council of the 1970s and early 1980s, extolling the virtues of the public-private partnership principle. Of course, what he is in favour of is contracting out. That is what the PPP is—it is contracting out. What he does not understand is that it is one thing to contract out a relatively simple project, where the risks are relatively quantifiable—say, a hospital project; he is a recent convert to that—but it is another matter to contract out the unquantifiable risks of deep tube building.

The risks are so unquantifiable that a decision has to be made: what risks will the purchaser take and what risks will the provider take? The more risks that one transfers to the provider, the more the costs will go up. If the Jubilee line had been contracted out, the risks would have made the deal fantastically expensive. It was not a PPP. The state bore the risk. The increase in costs shows how big the risks were.

The Secretary of State's bidding process was meant to be opened formally in autumn last year, but Railtrack's potential bid for all the main parts of the PPP deterred the other bidders from coming forward, so, on 15 June in the House, he announced that Railtrack would be given exclusive rights to bid for the sub-surface lines. He said that the plan would be a

"true example of a modern, integrated transport system."—[*Official Report*, 15 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 156.]

Railtrack was in Labour's good books then. Despite the difficulties and uncertainties created by the terrible accident at Paddington, which would delay a small part of the project, on the instructions of Sir Alastair Morton of the Strategic Rail Authority, Railtrack was still preparing, this time last week, to bid formally on 31 January 2000 with a view to completion in eight weeks. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) is right. He agrees with that chronology.

As the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) mounted an increasingly effective campaign for selection as London's mayoral candidate, Railtrack fast became a political albatross about the Secretary of State's neck, so, on the basis of the least excuse, after I am sure a certain amount of active lobbying by the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, Railtrack was dropped like a hot brick for the Secretary of State's political convenience.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that that has the effect of delaying the PPP for the sub-surface lines for another 12 months? Will he confirm that other bidders such as Taylor Woodrow have gone cold on the deal? He should adopt our common-sense plans for a Londoners' tube.

I heard complaints that we were not making proposals: well, here they are. They include a new tube enterprise, with free shares for Londoners and for season-ticket holders. Management would be free to issue shares and bonds, which are so fashionable these days, particularly with the hon. Member for Brent, East. Management would get the politicians and Treasury out of its hair. Conservatives would support the Londoners' tube, so that it could start new projects for new lines to meet the demands of Londoners. Labour will not do that, however, because Labour is wedded to the dogma of state control.

Where has the Deputy Prime Minister left the tube and its long-suffering passengers? His transport policy has become an open and shut case. He goes round the United

Kingdom attending the opening ceremonies of rail infrastructure projects—such as Heathrow Express, the Jubilee line extension and the Croydon tramlink, which are all Conservative achievements—and, then, he comes back to his office and closes the Circle line, the Northern line and various stations, in peak time, because of the danger of overcrowding at mainline stations. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) explained, that situation is a consequence of the current Government investing less in the tube than the previous, Conservative, Government did.

The Deputy Prime Minister's problems are not all of his own making. He has had to put up with some less than full-hearted support from some of his colleagues and from the spin doctors at No. 10 Downing street. His friends—not Opposition Members—started the speculation on his future. Two years ago, the Deputy Prime Minister teased a junior Minister—the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson)—with a crab in a jar. Today, that same man is being spoken of by the Prime Minister's spin doctors as the right hon. Gentleman's successor.

Whisperers in the right hon. Gentleman's own party are out to get him. Now that the Prime Minister has assured everyone that

"He is an excellent man doing an excellent job",

we know that the skids are under him. He is going down the tubes with his own public-private partnership.

The great experiment in joined-up Government has failed. The creation of the huge Environment, Transport and the Regions super-ministry is nothing but a triumph of spin over substance. Today, yet another Channel 4 poll has confirmed that 79 per cent. of people think that the Government have failed on transport. It is time for the Prime Minister to act.

The Deputy Prime Minister cannot cope. He must give up some or all of his responsibilities before the standstill in Britain gets ever worse.

9.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): Was that it? This was the debate that was supposed to have us reeling on the ropes, but the truth is that it has been an abject failure for the official Opposition, and especially for their Front-Bench spokesmen—to whom I promise to return.

Generally, we have heard many and varied—not to say variable—speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House. We have also heard speeches from almost all of the House's would-be mayoral candidates. Inevitably, rather more of the potential candidates are Labour Members—reflecting both the greater abundance of talent among Labour Members and the fact that at least all of our would-be candidates have been allowed on to the shortlist.

Hon. Members will have heard the speeches of the would-be candidates and come to their own judgment, as they will have done on the speeches of other hon. Members. Unfortunately, time does not permit me to respond in detail to all the speeches, but I shall say this: it was noticeable that, throughout the debate, there were many more Labour than Opposition Members in the Chamber. Although the Opposition have just about maintained their number of speakers, most of them have sounded very much like pressed men. It is perfectly clear that the Labour party takes transport seriously—that is widely appreciated across the country—and, doubtless, we shall be rewarded in due course.

I should say a word about the speeches of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) and of his hapless understrapper, the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin). It is delightful to see the hon. Member in the Chamber after his four-hour absence from the debate; I hope that he is not poorly, too.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham has been obliged to return to his sickbed and is, therefore, unable to be with us for the replies. He began the debate with a speech full of complaint and accusation against the Government. He is responsible for the critical motion before us and for his party's transport policies, such as they are. He must answer for them and it is my duty to address them in my response to the debate.

I remind the House with irony that, only two weeks ago, the right hon. Gentleman was boasting of the "youth and vigour" of his Front-Bench team. It was a ludicrous claim at the time, and that youth and vigour has now been more than a little sapped as a result of a pager message dispatching the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) to the outer reaches of the Back Benches—a sacrifice on the altar of Tory bigotry, cheered on by the party's erstwhile leader. If what we have heard today represents the best that the Conservative party can offer by way of youth and vigour, the Government can relax for a little while longer and we can sleep peacefully in our beds. If that is the best that the Tories can do, my advice to the Opposition Front Bench is to watch out for those telltale vibrations about the midriff—it will be a pager message coming through.

Today's debate has been a feeble performance by the Opposition. They thought that they had my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on the back foot, but they have failed to press home their attack. My right hon. Friend made a magnificent speech. By contrast, the Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen have looked like puppy dogs snapping at his heels—ineffectual underlings in the shadow of a colossus.

The hon. Member for North Essex does his best with the poor lead given by the shadow spokesman. It would be helpful if the right hon. Member for Wokingham knew a little more about the subject. He poses as the friend of the motorist—a former member of a Tory Cabinet that presided over a massive increase in road congestion, promised the motorist a fantasy league of road and motorway improvements that were uncosted, unfunded and undelivered, and increased taxes on the motorist from £4 billion a year to £21 billion a year with not a penny of the increase being paid back. Are the Conservatives not aware that, in 1999, under this Labour Government, the cost of motoring in Britain is at its lowest level for 20 years?

Mr. Jenkin *rose—*

Mr. Hill: I am sorry. The hon. Gentleman has not been in the Chamber for the majority of the debate. Most of the Back-Bench speeches have been longer than the time that I have available and I wish to enjoy my day in court. I have much to say and little time in which to say it.

Are not the Conservatives also aware that, this year, we are spending in excess of £400 million more on trunk road maintenance than was spent in the last year of Tory rule?

[Mr. Hill]

Next year, the figure will be £530 million more. Are they not aware that, this year, we have announced the end of the fuel duty escalator, introduced by the Conservatives, and have promised that every penny raised by any further real increase in fuel duty will go directly to the motorist and public transport—something that the Tories would never do? Where have the Tories been?

Opposition spokesmen ask where the new train and bus services are. Are they not aware that, in 1999, under Labour, 1,000 more trains are being run each day than when the Conservatives lost power in 1997? Are they not aware that rail passenger journeys increased by 11 per cent. in the past two years, and rail freight increased by 15 per cent? Are they not aware that, in the past 12 months, bus passenger journeys have risen for the first time since bus deregulation and privatisation in 1986? Are they not aware of the 1,800 new and enhanced bus services now in operation as a direct result of the Government's rural bus grant initiative—a commitment to the countryside never contemplated by the Tory Government? Where have the Tories been? I can tell hon. Members where the right hon. Member for Wokingham has been—he has been tying himself and his party in knots over congestion charging and wiping out the lessons even the Tories had begun to learn after 18 years of transport failure.

The right hon. Gentleman's sidekick, the hon. Member for North Essex, knows exactly what I mean. Speaking on transport and the environment at no less a body than the Institute of Directors earlier this year, he said that in the previous Government's

"1996 Green Paper we took the transport debate on . . . The Conservatives agree with much in"—

Labour's—

"transport white paper . . . It rightly gives high priority to environmental issues . . . We do not rule out road charges for infrastructure investment . . . In short, Conservative objectives for transport are the same as the Government".

Well, apparently not now—and the hon. Gentleman will have to make his peace with his boss. I wish him a better fate than the hon. Member for Witney. I have this message for the right hon. Member for Wokingham in his sick bed: in seeking to politicise congestion charging, he is playing a dangerous game. He is breaking what was a growing political consensus, and the country will be the worse for it.

Frankly, it is a failure of leadership, and it compounds other failures, not least in this debate. The right hon. Member for Wokingham cannot help but be aware that there is a new, lean and hungry presence on the Opposition Back Benches—Members who made rather better speeches than he did. We have all heard about his leader's spring reshuffle. I say to him, "Beware the ides of March". In tonight's debate, and in this motion, the Opposition have the temerity to accuse the Government of carrying out cuts in London's underground. On what planet—I am doing the planet joke—have the Tories been living?

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already comprehensively assisted them in this matter, but let me reiterate the facts; it will not take long. First, as a result of years of Tory under-investment in the tube, the Government inherited a huge investment backlog of arrears of £1.2 billion. Secondly, what would have been the Tory solution to that crisis? The answer is yet more cuts in spending. To be precise, the Tories planned a grant to London Transport of just £161 million this year which, after coping with the consequences of the poorly planned Jubilee line extension, would have left no support at all for the core underground network.

Thirdly, what has Labour done about it? Last year, we announced an extra £365 million funding for London Transport to reverse the Tory cuts, and, this, summer, we announced a further £500 million for this year and next. Fourthly, as a result, London Transport will be able to invest almost £600 million more than it would have done under the plans of the Tory Government—QED, let us hear no more of this claptrap about cuts in tube investment.

Mr. Gray: Is the Minister aware of information produced by the Library which states that, in 1995–96, the Conservatives invested just over £1 billion, and, in 1996–97, just over £1 billion? In 1997–98, investment was £800 million, and the following year, it was £698 million. This year, investment is £278 million. In other words, investment in the underground has gone down massively under Labour.

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman fancies himself as an expert on these matters, but we are talking about the Government's core investment in the tube system, not about expenditure in the Jubilee line extension—a system initiated by the Conservative Government, following bad advice, which has proved to be disastrous.

Mr. Jenkin: Here are the figures—in the last three years of the Conservative Government, we invested £3 billion in the tube. In the first three years of this Government, they will be investing only £1.7 billion. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) pointed out, that accounts for a lower level of investment in core tube, non-Jubilee line expenditure. That is a cut.

Mr. Hill: The Opposition are still talking about the investment required in the Jubilee line extension to compensate for their failures in government to initiate sensible and well-founded tube investment. Thus far, the Government's average investment in London's core network is about £480 million a year. The average over the 18 wasted Tory years was £280 million a year.

The Government's record in providing new and higher investment in London's tube network is excellent, but we cannot simply go on increasing the grant that we give to London Transport. Throwing more and more money at the underground will not solve its problems. It would do nothing to ensure that the money was spent efficiently. It would not prevent the massive cost overruns on construction projects. It would not provide the stable, long-term framework that the underground needs to make the transformation to a modern, reliable service for the next millennium. That we will achieve through the public-private partnership. The Opposition have done their best to rubbish the PPP, and they have failed.

Mr. Brake: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: No. I have been disappointed with the interventions that I have taken so far, and there is a lot more good stuff to come.

The Opposition said that there would be no interest from the private sector in the PPP, and they were wrong. Five consortiums of leading firms are competing for the deep tube infrastructure contracts, and the bids are due back in March.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): When?

Mr. Hill: March. When I say March, I mean March—in the new millennium, that is.

The PPP contracts are sound, and competition for the sub-surface contract will be launched soon. The PPP is on track to provide the step change in the underground that we want. We are not going to be rushed into setting artificial deadlines—we have learned from the mess made over rail privatisation. In good time, we will deliver a solution that offers best value for money.

Of course, there are other options on offer. The Opposition want to privatise the whole lot—break it up and sell it off, against the will of Londoners. The Opposition, like Charles I, have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. That plan is a recipe for yet more misery for London's travelling public.

Mr. Jenkin: Who wrote this?

Mr. Hill: It is good stuff, is it not? Obviously, the Opposition are fazed by the occasional historical and literary reference. We do not try to impose very much on their intellectual resources, but they ought to be receptive to an occasional bit of education.

Then, of course, we have what might be described as the Weston-super-Mare/Brent-East option: raise the money through bonds, keep the whole operation in the public sector, at—as if by magic—no greater cost to the public purse. That is the black hole approach. Let us be entirely clear. Public bonds are just another form of public borrowing. It is the public sector that carries the risk. If things go wrong, it is the taxpayer or the ratepayer who carries the can. If public bonds had been used to fund the Jubilee line extension, it is London's ratepayers who would have been faced with a bill for almost £2 billion to meet the cost overrun.

By contrast, and this is vital, under the PPP all the risk is shouldered by the private sector—a point made effectively by my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) in his immensely wise and well-informed speech.

Mr. Snape: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hill: How can I resist my transport guru?

Mr. Snape: I want to give the Conservatives a break from the drubbing that my hon. Friend is giving them. In the time that he has left, could he address issues north of Potters Bar for the benefit of the rest of us?

Mr. Hill: The PPP is about far more than different forms of borrowing. It will bring private sector disciplines to bear on the investment programme. It will go far beyond what has already been done under PFI contracts. I remind the House of the conclusions of the most recently commissioned independent report on the PPP. Despite frequent claims to the contrary, the report found that the PPP would not double the cost of borrowing, but would lead to improvements in efficiency in the order of 20 to 30 per cent., generating massive efficiencies in the tube investment programme over 15 years.

The report by PricewaterhouseCoopers, which was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, and which has now been placed in the Library, specifically examines the cost to Londoners of the PPP compared with public bonds. The report finds that the PPP would save—I repeat save—£4.5 billion, which could be spent on our national priorities of health and education. Bond financing would not achieve that; privatisation would certainly not achieve that. The sensible, lasting solution to the tube's problems is to secure massive investment, to ensure that the money is well spent, and to have a publicly accountable London Underground that is dedicated to improved services for passengers. Only the PPP—publicly owned, publicly run and properly financed—can achieve all that.

In our 1997 election manifesto, we said that we would introduce

"a new public private partnership to improve the Underground, safeguard its commitment to the public interest, and guarantee value for money to taxpayers and passengers".

That is what we said, and that is what we will deliver. On roads, we said that we would invest in maintenance to rescue our motorway and trunk road network from the worst state it had fallen into since records began. This year, we are spending £765 million on road maintenance, which is 40 per cent. more than in the last year of Tory rule. What we said we would do, we are delivering.

On railways, we said that we would establish a new rail authority to provide a clear, coherent and strategic programme for our railway network. That is why we are bringing in the new Strategic Rail Authority under the Transport Bill. We said that we would encourage more freight on to rail. Rail freight is up by 15 per cent. in the past two years and there are 40 new rail freight terminals. We said that we would encourage more passengers on to rail. Investment in rail is up by a third over the past two years and passenger journeys have increased by 11 per cent. We now have the highest number of rail passenger journeys for 40 years. What we said we would do, we have delivered.

We need no lessons on transport policy from the party which gave us road congestion—

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 144, Noes 369.

Division No. 14] **[10 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Bercow, John
Amess, David	Beresford, Sir Paul
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael	Blunt, Crispin
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James	Boswell, Tim
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Baldry, Tony	Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Beggs, Roy	Brady, Graham

Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia

Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 327, Noes 176.

Division No. 15] **[10.15 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon

Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rochie, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham

Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's approach for an Integrated Transport Strategy; deplores the previous Government's record of under-investment in transport, fragmentation of bus and rail services and encouragement of ill-planned out-of-town development; in particular condemns their erratic investment in London Underground, which left a £1.2 billion backlog; welcomes the Government's long-term strategy to secure over £8 billion investment for upgrading London Underground over the next 15 years; deplores the official Opposition's plans to privatise London Underground; and welcomes the Government's commitment to an extra £1.8 billion for public transport and local transport plans, improving road maintenance, reducing pollution, and encouraging the major investment needed to widen transport choice.

Post Office

[Relevant documents: The Twelfth Report from the Trade and Industry Committee, Session 1998–99, on the 1999 Post Office White Paper (HC 94) and the Government's response thereto (Session 1999–2000, HC 50).]

10.28 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I beg to move,

That the Postal Privilege (Suspension) Order 1999 (Revocation) Order 1999 (S.I., 1999, No. 2863), dated 19th October 1999, a copy of which was laid before this House on 20th October, in the last Session of Parliament, be revoked.

The motion seeks to annul the statutory instrument laid before the House by the Government in October, which revokes their earlier statutory instrument, laid before the House in July, which would have reduced the Post Office monopoly from £1 to 50p. In July, that was the Government's policy, and the Opposition have moved the motion to enable the Government to stick to their policy.

This is a classic example of the Government's approach of saying one thing and doing another. They said that they wanted to liberalise the postal delivery market, but the reality is a continuation of the status quo. The motion is therefore designed to help the Government to say one thing and do that thing. It is designed to help new Labour to stand up to old Labour. So often, we hear the language of the free market of deregulation from the Government but the reality is anti-business, increasing regulation and distrust of the free market. Traditional Labour is always there but, tonight, with our help, new Labour can assert itself by voting with us to overturn the Government's latest pusillanimous U-turn. We are seeing the Government's stamp of weak authority.

The Government have got themselves into a deep mess over their plans for the Post Office. On 8 July, the Secretary of State, with great bravado and flourish, announced his Post Office White Paper, which, he said,

"sets an agenda for the Post Office . . . for the 21st century. Today's announcement is good news for the Post Office . . . because it can now build for the future with real confidence."—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1999; Vol. 334, c. 1175.]

In that same spirit of bravado, the right hon. Gentleman, on that same day, laid the order reducing the Post Office monopoly from £1 to 50p.

The White Paper states:

"The Government believes that greater competition will bring benefits to the consumer. At present competition is restricted to items costing £1 or more. The Government will take a major first step towards liberalisation by halving the monopoly currently enjoyed by the Post Office to 50p . . . The Government is committed to further liberalisation of the market."

That was the Government's position on 8 July.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Does my hon. Friend link this to the Government's big and shouted campaign about rip-off Britain, which they seem to want to abandon? They got the Minister of State, Cabinet Office to make an announcement and then they shifted him out of his job. Now they are ripping off Britain with the order that is before us.

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The order means that the British consumer will not be able to benefit from the liberalisation of the postal market that would, in the long run, inevitably reduce prices. So much else of rip-off Britain is a consequence of the Government. The extreme increases in petrol and diesel duties are adding to the cost of supermarket space, and they did nothing in the Seattle round last week to seek to reduce the tariffs on imported goods and services for which consumers are paying.

There we have it. On 8 July, the Government were determined to give the Post Office commercial freedom, and as a quid pro quo were reducing its monopoly from £1 to 50p. That was the considered opinion that the Government had carefully reached. That was the right thing to do to enable the Post Office and its competitors to respond to the fast-changing postal delivery market without jeopardising the Post Office's universal service obligation. The internet means that there are new methods of communication and more household deliveries as people order goods by the internet and by e-mail.

The proposed changes that the Government announced in July were welcomed by the Mail Users Association Ltd., which said that, while the Government's recognition that greater competition would bring benefits to the consumer was welcomed, it was reassured that the proposed halving of the monopoly to 50p was seen as a major first step towards liberalisation.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Is my hon. Friend aware that the Post Office has nothing to fear? The 1999 Trade and Industry Report on the Post Office White Paper weighs exactly 176 g. Is he aware also that, even if the monopoly were reduced to 50p, the Post Office would still have the monopoly to deliver that report, as 50p allows postage of up to 200 g?

Mr. Gibb: That is right.

Even this first step of reducing the monopoly would not have had a huge impact on the Post Office. As it admitted, only 6 per cent. of Royal Mail's traffic lies between the £1 and 50p tariff. The Post Office anticipated losing only about a third of that market, so just 2 per cent. of the market would be lost by reducing the monopoly from £1 to 50p.

In evidence to the Select Committee, the Department of Trade and Industry's civil servants revealed that

"Ministers determined it was very important to signal a liberalisation of the marketplace and that is what the move to 50p is all about . . . to signal that more competition in a liberalised marketplace will be in the best interests of the consumer, the UK economy and . . . the Post Office."

They went on to say in their evidence:

"That is the judgment which Ministers have reached."

What happened to that judgment? The first cracks appeared on 27 July, when the hon. Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) and a number of his colleagues prayed against the statutory instrument of 8 July. There followed the summer of discontent—*[Interruption.]* They are all my own lines. In the run-up to the Labour party conference, there was the real risk of defeat for the Labour leadership, and the Secretary of State in particular.

The Communication Workers Union wanted the 50p proposal dropped. Derek Hodgson, the general secretary of the CWU, was quoted as saying that, if the Government

"don't back off, they have got a fight on their hands and they have got a fight that they can't possibly win."

The Guardian of 29 September summed up what happened next. It reported:

"Last-minute negotiations between union leaders, party managers and ministers continued last night over the wording of motions that are scheduled to be put to delegates today. However, the indications were that government compromises would prevent a head-to-head conference row. In the most surprising change of policy, trade secretary Stephen Byers' White Paper plans to reduce the Post Office's monopoly on letter delivery from £1 to 50p . . . will now be referred to the new Post Office Regulator."

There it is. Despite all the reforms to the Labour party by Neil Kinnock and despite the new Labour project, it is business as usual, with Labour's trade union paymasters determining not only Labour party policy but, more seriously, the policy of the British Government.

Mr. Fabricant: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. I am a little surprised that he is so surprised about the power of the trade unions. Does he not realise that the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) is depending on the trade unions for his selection as the Labour candidate for mayor of London?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. May I remind the House that the matter is before us only until 11.30 pm? Such interventions certainly do not help.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): It was a clever point.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that it was far from clever.

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) made what I considered a fairly valid point. Furthermore, the Labour party is depending on millions of pounds of trade union money to fund its general election campaign.

Who is the Minister spearheading the U-turn caused by blackmail from the Communication Workers Union? He is none other than the newly appointed Minister and former general secretary of the CWU, the hon. Member for Hull, West and Hessle (Mr. Johnson).

Perhaps we should be grateful to the CWU. Mr. Hodgson, the general secretary, said that he was prepared to allow the monopoly rate to be set by the Post Office regulator. Thank you, Mr. Hodgson, for allowing the Government that concession. We now see who is running Post Office policy.

Later in the debate, we will hear the Minister give his reasons for the Government's U-turn. I bet that he will not say, "Oh, we had to change our policy because of pressure at the Labour party conference from the trade unions." Despite the masses of press coverage of the row, despite statements from Derek Hodgson and despite the fact that everyone knows it to be the case, the Minister will find another reason to put to the House. The excuse that he will give will be that the Select Committee on Trade and Industry recommended the change of policy in its report published on 14 September. That is what he said on television this afternoon, and no doubt it is what he will say tonight.

As the Minister for Science, Lord Sainsbury, said in the other place,

"We take seriously the advice of the Trade and Industry Committee; and I hope that noble Lords would not suggest that we do otherwise."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 29 November 1999; Vol. 607, c. 708.]

So, let us stand by for the Minister to use that as his reason—and remember, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you heard it here first.

If the Minister gives such a reason, it will be extremely odd, because, some nine days after the Trade and Industry Committee report was published, he was quoted in *The Times* of 23 September as saying:

"We will look at what the Trade and Industry Committee says but we have already made the order on the monopoly. The reduction is a crucial part of the package of reforms for the Post Office."

So, he was still defending the reduction in the monopoly—nine days after the report was published, but six days before that crucial meeting at the Labour party conference.

Also on 23 September, the Minister wrote to every Labour Member of Parliament stressing the importance of reducing the Post Office monopoly to 50p, saying:

"the reduced monopoly level cannot be extracted without unravelling the entire package".

It is absolutely clear that the Select Committee report had nothing whatever to do with the U-turn. I therefore trust that the Minister will not insult the House by saying that that was the reason. We know that it is not the reason, he knows that it is not the reason and every Labour Member of Parliament knows, too.

The Minister might claim that, although he had a copy of the Select Committee report for nine days, he had issued a rebuttal to the press of its main recommendations despite not having read it in full, and that, when he read the report, at the same time as the Labour party conference, he saw the light and urged his Secretary of State to change the policy. If that is so—it beggars belief—he will be the first Minister of this Government to read a Select Committee report 15 days after publication, instead of the usual 15 days before.

If the Minister insists that the Select Committee report was his reason—if he claims that it is now Government policy to adopt all Trade and Industry Committee recommendations—perhaps he will explain what he is doing about the following concern in the Committee's 13th report on small businesses and enterprise:

"We have noticed a regrettable habit of relatively prosaic ministerial announcements being dressed up in Ministerial Statements and their accompanying Press Notices with potentially misleading figures."

Will he now recant all the misleading figures given by his Secretary of State since he took office? The reports also states:

"We . . . have grounds for complaint at the apparently scant regard the department pays to its evaluation of its own schemes".

[Mr. Gibb]

Let us consider the Trade and Industry Committee's 14th report on the Electronic Communications Bill, which says:

"We are particularly concerned . . . that the order necessary to bring

in

part I of the Bill . . . should not be subject to any parliamentary procedure. We recommend that . . . Parliament should have the opportunity to debate and vote on the issue."

Despite what the Minister said on Second Reading, is he to announce that he will allow Parliament to vote on the implementation of part I because it is a recommendation of the Trade and Industry Committee?

The Government's behaviour over this issue is risible, and it is being exposed. For purely internal Labour party reasons, the Government have made a mockery of their policy on the Post Office. The result of revoking the 8 July order will be that Britain will have a Post Office monopoly as extensive as Portugal and Greece, and the UK market will be less liberalised than postal markets throughout Scandinavia and northern Europe, and Italy and Spain.

The views of the private sector package delivery companies can be summed up by TNT, which has said:

"If the UK . . . does not rapidly deregulate its postal market, along with other postal operators, the Post Office will be unable to cope with competition when liberalisation is imposed by Brussels."

Mr. Forth: Has my hon. Friend noticed that the former trade unionist, who is now the Under-Secretary, is entitled the Minister for Competitiveness? Does my hon. Friend not find that a little mystifying? Following his forensic and skilful analysis of what has gone on, it would appear that the Under-Secretary is in fact the Minister for Trade Unionism and Uncompetitiveness. Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we are to have open government, the Minister's title should be changed?

Mr. Gibb: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. The Minister's title is almost an oxymoron, given his track record during his short term in office.

The explanation given by TNT about the liberalisation of the market being required by Brussels in the years to come was the key reason given in the White Paper for the liberalisation and the reduction in the monopoly. Paragraph 11 states:

"The disciplines of increasing competition and independent regulation in its home market should have the additional benefit of strengthening the Post Office and improving its competitive position in the European market and beyond, as liberalisation extends and the markets are opened up."

Of course those were the Government's words in July, not today.

Government policy towards the Post Office is in complete disarray: as well as the damage to the Post Office, to customers, to business and to Post Office employees caused by the U-turn, we have the chaos of the Government's stewardship of the Horizon project and their decision to abandon the benefit swipe card, which would have enabled claimants to continue to be paid at post offices. As they know, that decision will cause a 30 per cent. drop in the income of average independent sub-post offices. How much more incompetence can the post office network take? In the interests of liberating the postal market and preparing our Post Office for survival in a new, competitive era, I urge the Government to rethink their U-turn and join us in voting for the annulment of this weak and damaging statutory instrument.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind hon. Members that the time limit for the debate is 11.30 and short speeches would be appreciated.

10.47 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I find it rather strange that the Conservatives, who consider this a matter of some importance, cut 15 minutes off the debate by having a second vote on the business that we dealt with previously—especially when so many Conservative Members want to speak.

As an exercise in humbug, the speech of the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) takes some beating. Those of us who were Members of the House before the general election well remember the Conservative Government's attempts to introduce the privatisation of the Post Office, and they had to retreat in the face of the refusal of 13 of their own people to support it. [HON. MEMBERS: "Narrow majority."] That is true but, had they wanted to, they could have achieved a majority for a reduction in the monopoly. They did nothing about it. If this issue is so important for the Conservatives now, why was it not important when they had the power to act? They chose not to act, so we need no lessons from them.

Equally, we need no lessons from the Conservatives about the danger to rural post offices, given the opportunities that they had to arrest the decline when they were in power. What is more, a side effect of agreeing to the motion would be an immediate 6 per cent. cut in the volume of post, which would obviously affect local post offices' business and result in further closures.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. O'Neill: No, I will not. *[Interruption.]* Because I want to make time.

Mr. Fabricant: We have 40 minutes.

Mr. O'Neill: The hon. Gentleman might be fortunate in catching the Chair's eye and may get an opportunity to speak. I shall carry on.

My colleagues on the Select Committee and I were clear in our mind that it would be pointless to introduce a regulatory regime to the Post Office while denying it the opportunity to pass judgment on the first issue of competitiveness, which was being introduced as part of the liberalisation of our postal system. It was also abundantly clear that, if we are to have a regulatory commission, one of its main roles should be considering questions of this nature and deciding whether 50p is the right figure. Some might have argued that we should have gone further. I am not clear about that.

Last week, I talked to former employees of TNT who are now working for the nationalised Dutch Post Office, which has 40 per cent. public ownership and no monopoly. The Select Committee also spoke to the

publicly owned Swedish postal service, which does not have a monopoly. There are a number of contradictory examples across Europe. It is wrong to vest in civil servants sole responsibility for the determination of the market in this area. I think that the Government are correct.

I envisage that there will be a reduction in the monopoly, but by what measure I am not sure. The Post Office should be competed against to make it more efficient. I do not oppose the order, but it would be foolhardy to introduce it now. The Government are sensible to withdraw the order. It is the responsibility of Government to use the Select Committee system to pause and reflect, and they took that opportunity. It could be argued that the Minister came to a conclusion much quicker than some of his colleagues have done in the past.

Mr. Forth: Given his position of influence and knowledge, can the hon. Gentleman tell us why the Government changed tack so dramatically during the summer?

Mr. O'Neill: They changed tack because they recognised that other factors were involved. The major factor was the recognition that the regulatory system should be given the first responsibility for making recommendations of this nature, and that it was not right to give that responsibility to civil servants.

A number of people made statements in opposition to the monopoly, and some do not want the break-up of the monopoly, certainly not until the European Union proposals come into effect and the directive is introduced. I am sure that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) recognises that the European Union is making a constructive contribution to the liberalisation of postal services across the continent, and that that will result in a more efficient postal system, which I am sure is what he wants.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. O'Neill: No, I am sorry. I shall finish now, because other hon. Members want to speak.

The Government's U-turn is a correct move to make.

Mr. Gibb: Does not the hon. Gentleman find it slightly odd that, nine days after the Government received a copy of his Committee's report, they were still defending the cut in the monopoly from £1 to 50p? The first we heard of any decision to accept the Select Committee's recommendation was on 29 September, during the Labour party conference.

Mr. O'Neill: The process of decision making in government is a mystery that few of us are exposed to at any time. There is little consolation in being on the Government Benches when it comes to dealing with such matters.

I think that the Government were correct to change their mind. The Select Committee report gave them the opportunity to pause and reflect, and I think that they came to the correct conclusion. As a consequence, once the regulator has looked into the matter, there will be a better consideration of what the level of monopoly should be. When we get that, we will be able to move on and have a better, more liberalised postal service that will be capable of competing internationally, as the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton said.

For those reasons, I am happy to support the Government, to ensure that we have a properly liberalised postal system. That should happen at an orderly pace, and we should take account of the views of all those concerned.

10.54 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): We should consider this matter on its merits. It is patently clear that the Government have made fools of themselves. However, the position that they have ended up with is sensible on economic grounds, regardless of the views of the trade unions.

I shall try to deal with some of the basic economics of the Post Office. I believe in competitive markets and liberal economics. Let us apply that to this case. The first question is this: what would be the implications for the Post Office of reducing the monopoly amount to 50p? According to the estimate that I have been given—I should be grateful if the Minister clarified this—about £1 million will be taken out of Post Office business. That takes into account the dynamics of the market; the sum may be less. It seems fairly clear, however, that a substantial amount of Post Office business will be lost, with all the implications that that involves for the Post Office network.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Cable: I shall be happy to do so later, but first I want to expand on what I have said.

As I understand it, the essential reason for the original proposal to cut the monopoly, and for Conservative Members' promotion of it, is the need for more competition. That is fine on one level, but there is already a great deal of competition with the Post Office. For instance, the massive proliferation of e-mail services has led to an enormous amount of competition, and telephony, faxes and so forth produce day-to-day competition. The Post Office has a monopoly in the statutory sense, but not in the market sense. A question that must be asked, especially by economists like me who believe in the market, is whether competition is always desirable.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Yes.

Dr. Cable: No, it is not. It is usually desirable, but there are instances in which it is not, and this is one of them. There are two practical reasons for that. The first relates to the universal service obligation. The Post Office operates through cross-subsidy. If some of its profitable business is taken out of the cross-subsidy arrangements, what happens? Either the universal service obligation must be abandoned or diluted—I do not know whether Conservative Members are arguing for that—or the element of cross-subsidy must be found in some other way, and the profitable parts of the Post Office must be

[Dr. Cable]

built up through extra charging on the remaining Post Office business. No one has explained how that will be dealt with.

Mr. Gibb: Has the hon. Gentleman read the Government's response to the Select Committee report, published on 23 November? It states, on page 11, the Government's belief that

"the current monopoly is higher than is justified by the need to fund the universal service obligation."

A pound is too high, and even 50p would not jeopardise the universal service obligation.

Dr. Cable: I do not have a great deal of confidence in the Government's judgment in this regard, because they have vacillated so much. One reason why they were wrong to make that statement is that one of the basic drivers, as it were, behind the Post Office is economy of scale. If the hon. Gentleman examined the regulatory arrangements governing Post Offices in countries such as the United States and Germany, which have big postal systems, he would discover that the marginal cost of a postal operation is about 60 per cent. of the average. Taking a bit of business away will increase the average cost of the remainder. There are very good reasons for not forcing the pace of liberalisation of the Post Office when that would reduce business and lose economies of scale in Post Office operations.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Dr. Cable: On that point, I am happy to give way.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman mentioned marginal costs. Can he confirm the points that he made by telling us what proportion of Post Office business is under the value of 50p per item?

Dr. Cable: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a figure off the cuff.

Mr. Fabricant: I am asking about marginal costs.

Dr. Cable: We are talking about marginal costs to the system as a whole, as the hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well. The example that I am citing is not based on a particular section of a business, or on a particular point in time. The figure is accepted to the extent that it has been built into the system of regulation in the United States. It is a general principle that would apply under the new system of Post Office regulation that the Government propose. It is a general rule, not simply an anecdote that I have plucked from the air, and I think it something that the hon. Gentleman can understand.

The Government have already inflicted considerable damage by failing to understand the way in which monopoly networks such as the railway system operate, and they propose to do the same to the Post Office. There is an argument for having a gradual, slow process of liberalisation to which the Post Office system can adapt. Indeed, that has already happened. Because of inflation over the past two decades, the £1 monopoly has already lost 50 per cent. of its value.

Inflation is a liberalising force. I know that it happened rather faster when the Conservatives were in government; the process of liberalisation through inflation has now slowed down. I refer, of course, to the Governments of the 1970s. However, the basic point is correct. Liberalisation is occurring through inflation.

There is an argument for faster liberalisation, provided that what is happening is clearly signalled to the Post Office so that it can prepare. That is why the context of the whole discussion needs to be made clearer.

As we all recognise, the fundamental problem with the Post Office is that it is shortly to sustain some financial blows. One is the loss of the benefits business. The other is that it will have to finance its all-automation system at a cost of £100 million. Inflicting the loss of another £100 million of business at this time is scarcely helpful to the modernisation of the system.

The central problem of the Post Office is that, far from being a loss-making nationalised industry of the old type, it contributes to a ludicrous extent to the national Exchequer. If hon. Members look at the Post Office accounts for the past five years, they will find that it has been paying roughly 75 per cent. of its net profits to the Treasury, partly through corporation tax, partly through the financial levy. That is a crass way to run a system. Inflicting a sudden, once-and-for-all loss of business through the reduction of the monopoly merely serves to compound the problem.

The Government are introducing Post Office legislation. We will deal with that in a complex Bill shortly. It will set our Post Office regulatory framework. That is the occasion on which to examine the speed at which liberalisation should happen.

The Government are trying to push the measure through now. It reflects considerable discredit on them that they thought of it in the first place but did not think it through. To promote it now is opportunist and unhelpful. The Post Office should retain its £1 monopoly arrangements until there is a proper opportunity for an investigation of the economics of the matter by a non-political regulator in one or two years' time.

11.2 pm

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North): Reference has been made to my contribution on the issue and to the fact that, along with a number of Labour Members, I prayed against the order that was laid. Why was that? Quite simply, I felt at the time, as did my colleagues, that the Government had got it wrong. Why was that?

The Select Committee on Trade and Industry took a considerable amount of evidence on the issue. A number of us really cared about some of the matters that concentrated the mind of the Conservative party when it was in government: it was particularly concerned about the threat to rural post offices. Taking an almost pre-emptive strike at the monopoly could have some impact on the profitability of the Post Office and there could be subsequent consequences for rural post offices in particular. The Select Committee was spot on when it concluded that, if a regulator were to be appointed under the changes to the Post Office following the White Paper, the task of assessing the economics of the relevant proposals should be handed to him or her.

My personal view is that all post office businesses in Europe should reduce progressively their monopoly in postal services. If we do not go down that road, national

postal companies such as Deutsche Post, which is rapidly gobbling up postal organisations throughout Europe, and the Dutch post office, TNT, will take advantage. TNT's monopoly will come into effect on 1 January and, surprise, surprise, when we recently met its representatives in the Netherlands, they said that they were disappointed that Europe was not following the company's lead and that it should be a trail blazer.

As I have said, the Select Committee was spot on. I am delighted that the Minister has taken the opportunity to look at the Select Committee report, to take on board its recommendations and to say that the task of assessing the proposals should be given to the regulator when he or she is in post. I only hope that organisations with an interest in those matters will make known to the regulator their views on developing a common approach to reducing the monopoly across the European Union.

11.5 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I should like to make only one or two points, as I am well aware of the time.

The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) said he thought that the Government had changed their mind because of the report from the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. With the greatest respect, the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs has presented four reports—some of which were published as long as four or five months ago—but has not received a reply to them. I therefore wonder whether the Trade and Industry report was the reason for the Government's change of mind. If it was, good luck to the hon. Gentleman and his Committee.

Regardless of whether the Government have made a U-turn, I fully support the Government's policy. I have been very concerned, for example, about loss of the monopoly, the 5 or 6 per cent. loss of business, and the damaging prospect of automatic credit transfer. In Wales, ACT is likely to see off about 55 per cent. of rural post offices. We tamper with the monopoly at our peril.

Despite market forces and the need to liberalise, if the monopoly is ended, cherry-picking will inevitably result. In some parts of my constituency, postmen travel 10 or even 12 miles to deliver one letter. If so-called liberalisation is instituted, I do not know what will happen to families who depend on those postmen or what type of service they will be able to expect. The universal service obligation is extremely important, and one can but hope that it will be embedded in any future move to liberalise—or whatever one chooses to call it—the postal service.

I am therefore pleased that the Government have rethought the matter. The hon. Member for Ochil described that as a U-turn—perhaps it is; I do not know—but, whatever it is, I am pleased that it has happened. The postal service has the confidence of the people of the United Kingdom, and the Government will tamper with its monopoly at their peril. The public are squarely behind the postal service.

As hon. Members have said, we need to consider the possibility of directing less of the levy to central Government. Such a change may be one way—I know not—of ensuring a better future for the Post Office. It is one option that should be considered.

In the current situation, I welcome the Government's stance. The official Opposition have come rather late with their prayer. Although I do not know what they hope to achieve today, I am glad that the main issues which must be addressed have at least been aired, albeit briefly.

I am pleased that the Government have reconsidered. I hope that no rash decisions will be taken, and that the Government will take heed of what is said not only by the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, but by hon. Members on both sides of the House and by the public. The public are saying very clearly that the Post Office delivers a very fine, first-class service and that we have to ensure that it continues delivering that service. Destroying the monopoly without substituting other arrangements is not the way forward.

11.8 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I welcome this opportunity to speak in this debate, even if I am able to do so only briefly.

I note that not one Conservative Member chose to demur from the Trade and Industry Select Committee's decision, at paragraph (f), on page xxi, to ask the Government to think again about reducing the monopoly levy. One can but surmise that Conservative Members support the Committee's recommendation and concede the logic of the Government's position. Even if the Government have changed their mind, what is wrong with that?

We often argue in this place that insufficient attention is paid to Select Committees' decisions. I therefore very much welcome the opportunity that we have on Thursday afternoons, tomorrow included, to debate either Select Committee reports or Government White Papers. The Government have listened and acted, but the Conservatives are churlishly trying to find ways to attack the Government, making cheap political points that are undesirable and could have adverse effects.

Our decisions on the future of the Post Office will have major consequences. The White Paper in the summer contained four key points that the Post Office had to look at in evolving its performance: it had to face up to a liberalisation agenda; it had to keep its universality; it had to consider how it could increase investment; and it had to be brought up to date. Those four points may seem easy to take together, but there is some conflict between them and we are considering how that conflict could break out.

The performance and innovation unit is looking at the impact on sub-post offices of the Benefits Agency's decision to seek the introduction of ACT at the earliest opportunity. I shall concentrate on the implications of that, because, if we do not get it right, we shall lose many sub-post offices. I see the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) nodding. He knows that the *Western Daily Press* has been running a vigorous campaign to draw attention to the impact on sub-post offices if ACT is introduced without an understanding of how we can reinvest in them. The hon. Gentleman said that the post offices would lose the benefits trade. If they can get their act together and provide a thoughtful and careful way of doing the business properly they will keep it.

Earlier this week, I went to ICL to look at the Horizon project. I advise anyone who has time to do so. I found it fascinating. Information technology poses some threats, but there are also many opportunities. It can help to bring about an enhanced postal service and better communications. There is also an opportunity to break into banking, or at least to work with the high street

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banks, which have nowhere near as many branches as there are sub-post offices in many villages and high streets. Thirdly, but by no means least—I am sure that this will be mentioned tomorrow—there is the opportunity of modernising government.

Those three issues provide opportunities for the whole postal network, but particularly for sub-post offices to show that they have a future and can provide for all people—including the poorest, people drawing benefit and people living in rural areas—the services that they have provided best in the past. Those opportunities can be enhanced if we get it right. That is why it is important that the Government have listened. The issue cannot be treated in isolation. If they got this wrong, the implications of ACT would almost certainly increase. That would inevitably mean closure for some sub-post offices and others would fail to realise their opportunities.

The Government are right to have rethought the issue. I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister was able to argue in the *Western Daily Press* a couple of weeks ago about what he, as a former postie, wants. I am sure that he will be able to provide an effective refutation of what the Opposition have come up with. They have failed to understand the importance of getting our postal services right.

11.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): I listened with great interest to the informed and erudite comments that were made tonight. I also listened to the speech by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb). My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) said that humbug sprang to mind. I would add hyperbole and hypocrisy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The Minister would not suggest that any hon. Member would be involved in hypocrisy.

Mr. Johnson: I withdraw that immediately. Perhaps I should have said hysteria.

We should be grateful to the Opposition for giving us the opportunity to expose yet again their ineptitude in dealing with Britain's essential public services. Of all the issues that they have fumbled over the past 10 years, the Post Office must be the best example of that.

The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton did not once address the issues in the debate. He accused the Government of saying one thing and doing another.

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister has admitted to being a member of the Communication Workers Union. According to the Register of Members' Interests, which may now be out of date, he has been loaned equipment by that union. Should he not at least declare an interest, if indeed he should be allowed to speak in this debate?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Minister has declared his interest. I understood the hon. Gentleman to have said that the Minister had admitted to being a member of a trade union.

Mr. Fabricant: The Minister did not say that he received goods from that trade union and, as is the convention, he should have declared an interest before making his speech.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It has been known for Ministers and Back Benchers to declare an interest during the course of a speech. Perhaps we should wait and see.

Mr. Johnson: Like his policy on the Post Office, the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) is out of date. I wrote to the Register of Members' Interests as soon as I was appointed to this position and gave back the mobile phone and the two computers, so I have nothing to declare in that respect.

I would like to declare, however, that in two and a half years the Government have sorted out the previous Government's mess on Horizon and we are on course for having the entire network on line by 2001. We have ensured that the business is allowed to keep more of the finance that it generates and we have legislation on the stocks to enhance the commercial freedoms that we have already provided to the Post Office and the regulator will be appointed in a few months' time. That is all in line with our manifest commitments.

Mr. Chope: When will the regulator be appointed? The Select Committee recommendations were premised on the basis that the regulator would be appointed in the autumn. Of course that did not happen. The Minister is now talking about an appointment many months hence.

Mr. Johnson: As the White Paper made clear, the regulator will be appointed from 1 April.

In two and a half years, we have stuck to our manifesto commitments on the Post Office. I did some research today. I found a document filed under "Documents of absolutely no political relevance whatsoever". It was the 1992 Conservative party manifesto. It was next to a poster saying, "Vote Archer for London".

The manifesto on which the Conservative party fought the 1992 election and was then in government for the following five years says:

> "We will legislate to set up a new independent regulator . . . We will lower the limit on the Post Office monopoly much closer to the level of the first class stamp."

So, in five years in government, the Conservatives did not a single thing about the recommendations and the policy contained in their own manifesto. Instead, they set off on a wild piece of adventurism that was not in the manifesto—to break up and privatise the Post Office.

When they found that they could not privatise it, they attempted to plunder it—saying one thing and doing another. In May 1995, when he was the President of the Board of Trade, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) told the House that the Government would reduce the amount of money that they took from the Post Office to 40 per cent. of the post-tax profits. That would have reduced the money paid back to the Treasury to about £175 million. Later that year, the Chancellor of

the Exchequer hyped that up in the Red Book to £360 million, and they took £1 billion off the Post Office in three years—saying one thing and doing another.

The situation could have been so different if only the Conservatives had stopped to listen. If only they had listened to that august body, the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which, under a Conservative Administration—and with a Conservative majority—said in 1995:

"We recommend that the Government introduce legislation to convert the Post Office . . . into a 100 per cent. government-owned plc . . . in the knowledge that the future sale of any of the Government's shares in Post Office plc would be subject to parliamentary approval."

That was the recommendation. This is the policy that the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton said was sound when we announced it in July.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Johnson: I am sorry, but I am not giving way. This position is closed to interventions.

If Conservative Members had listened to the Select Committee, the Post Office could have had the commercial and financial freedom that it needs, instead of the seven years of stagnation that they condemned it to when they were in government.

Once we got away from the speech of the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, the points raised by other Members were all extremely sound. We will be appointing a regulator, and we advertised two months ago. The regulator will be in place from 1 April. There will be a commission of five people—the postal services commission which, as its first job, will be asked to look at where the monopoly limits should be.

The speeches by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and others were sound. For a party that is supposedly concerned about rural services, the Conservatives did not mention a word about the universal service obligation. When it was mentioned by the hon. Member for Twickenham, there was a groan—*[Interruption.]* I apologise—it was mentioned by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton. However, there was a groan from Conservative Back Benchers when the hon. Member for Twickenham mentioned it.

The universal service obligation and the uniform tariff guarantees people in rural communities the same input into, and access to, postal services—irrespective of where they live, and no matter how remote and rural. The point of the monopoly is not that monopolies are a good thing. The monopoly is there to ensure that the universal service can be provided at the uniform tariff, because the Post Office needs volume going through to guarantee that service. If the monopoly level came down to a level that would jeopardise the universal service obligation, it would be a serious blow to rural services in this country.

Having listened to the Select Committee and others, we are saying that, if the postal services commission says that reducing the monopoly to 50p will jeopardise the USO and that it should be 60p, once the toothpaste is out of the tube, it cannot be put back in again. Once the monopoly limit is changed, we cannot take it up again. It is sensible to say to the postal services commission that it should decide on the level. It may be 50p—it may be lower, it may be higher.

We have guaranteed the universal service obligation for the first time in the White Paper, and we will guarantee it in legislation. It is important that we protect that. It does not mean that the Government have decided that there is no case for liberalisation. It does mean that the regulator will do its job first before we take that any further.

Mr. Llwyd: I mentioned the universal service obligation earlier. From what the Minister has said, he appears to presume that the regulator is bound to lower the level. Is that the case?

Mr. Johnson: No. We have told the regulator that they must set the monopoly limit at a level—

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I understand that the French Government have announced that they will ignore the representations of the British Government—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman was courteous enough to approach me with the problem that he wishes to raise. My advice is that it is not related to the debate before us and that he would do better to wait until we have had the Division to raise what he considers to be an important point of order. We must get this debate out of the way first.

Sir George Young: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I understand your ruling, but I was anxious that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food should have time to come to the House at 11.30 to make a statement. He has just appeared on "Newsnight", and he owes the House an explanation of his failure—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.]* Order. Let me reply to the point of order. There is no point in shouting at me. I have given the right hon. Gentleman good advice and I suggest that he takes it.

Mr. Johnson: We will remit the issue to the Postal Service Commission, which will make the decision on the basis that the universal service obligation at a uniform tariff—those are two different things—must be protected. In the meantime, we have laid the revocation order that we are debating tonight. The order is necessary to ensure that the outcome of the Commission's review is not prejudged. The Government have accepted the recommendation of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, and it would be wrong simultaneously to press ahead with a cut in the monopoly.

The Government remain committed to greater competition in postal markets because it is an essential component in ensuring that the Post Office is successful in the new environment it faces. Together with better regulation and new commercial freedoms, greater competition through liberalisation is necessary to ensure that the Post Office is sufficiently challenged to achieve its objective of being a world class company. The revocation of the order reducing the monopoly to 50p results directly from our acceptance that, in that important area, there would be benefit in the new regulator also considering the issue before final decisions are made.

Developments will not happen quite as quickly as the Select Committee envisaged. It suggested that the regulator might be in office in the autumn. That would

[Mr. Johnson]

have been impossible. Our intention is that they should start work next spring. We are doing some preliminary work so that, as soon as they are appointed, they can make the issue their first priority. Some delay is a necessary consequence of the Government's acceptance of the Select Committee's advice, but, as the delay is likely to extend only to a matter of months, that added period of consideration is something that the House should welcome. It will of course be for the commission to tell us what time scale it can work to, but I am confident that it will do an excellent job with a reasonable time scale.

An overriding duty on the commission is to promote the delivery of the universal service obligation. In essence, that is what the debate tonight is about. It is vital that all customers, wherever they work or live in the UK, should be assured of a world class level of postal services.

Mr. Gibb: Does the Minister remember writing in his response to the Select Committee report:

"The Government also believes that the current monopoly is higher than is justified by the need to fund the universal service obligation."?

Mr. Johnson: I do remember writing that. The point is what the Postal Services Commission, which we are appointing as the independent regulator, thinks. It will be its job to decide those issues. I remind the Conservatives that that was their policy in 1992. They did nothing about it in five years and then raised it tonight in a debate on a revocation order. I have listened carefully to the arguments made in this debate, but I remain convinced of the need for the order. We are providing action on the Post Office where previously there was inertia. We are providing protection where there was previously decline and we are providing innovation where there was previously ineptitude. I hope that the House will oppose the motion and support the order.

It being half-past Eleven o'clock MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 17 (2) (Delegated Legislation (negative procedure) and Order [1 December].*

The House divided: Ayes 126, Noes 306.

Division No. 16] **[11.30 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and Mrs. Eleanor Laing.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry

Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I understand that the French Government have announced that they will ignore the representations of the British Government and will persist with the unlawful ban on British beef. Have you received a request, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who has just made an ineffective appearance on "Newsnight", to come to the House to explain his and the Prime Minister's complete failure to protect British farming interests in Europe?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I have received no indication—*[Interruption.]* Order. The right hon. Gentleman asked me to reply to the point of order.

[Mr. Michael J. Martin]

The Chair replies to points of order—no one else does. I have received no indication from the Government that there is to be any statement.

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Does the right hon. Lady want to make a point of order?

Mrs. Beckett: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My understanding, which can only be imperfect at present, is that there appears—*[Interruption.]* I do not need any interventions. It appears that the French Government may have made a statement. The British Government have no change of policy to announce. Obviously, if the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) wants a statement from my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, we shall consider that request and discuss it through the usual channels. My understanding of the situation at present is that the British Government's position is unchanged; there is thus no change of policy to announce to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Chair has no power in these matters. The point of order was a question as to whether there would be a Government statement. We have heard from the Leader of the House that there will not be a statement tonight, so I am obliged to continue the business of the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As the Leader of the House is in the Chamber, will she give us an assurance that tomorrow's business can be adjusted, so that we can take this serious matter into account? Tomorrow, there will be debates in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall; they are neither time sensitive nor urgent. Will the Leader of the House give us an undertaking that she will try to change tomorrow's business?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a Liberal Democrat Whip and has access to the usual channels. These matters are for the usual channels—not for the Chair.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind hon. Members that I have explained my view on these matters.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As the guardian of the rights of Back Benchers, will you express the general principle that it is quite disgraceful that the Minister of Agriculture should be parading around on "Newsnight", commenting on a matter that vitally affects one of our great industries, which is in grave difficulty, instead of coming to this House to announce that there has been a major setback for the Government? The House needs to be told about that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The answer is no. I have been here in this Chamber looking after the rules of the House of Commons.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) has said, you are the custodian of the rights of this House, and I ask you a direct question under a point of order. Is it right that a Minister of Agriculture should go to the media to deal with a matter that should be announced in this House and is critical to many constituencies?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I shall not take any more points of order on this matter. The fact is that the rules of the House require me to call the next motion.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am taking the motion before us. I am looking after the rules of the House. I have explained my position.

CONSOLIDATED FUND BILL

Motion made, and Question put,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, any Consolidated Fund Bill ordered to be brought in and read the first time shall be proceeded with as if the Second Reading thereof stood as an Order of the day, and Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills) shall apply.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any messages from the Lords shall have been received.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh) to present a petition.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus) *rose—*

Mr. Jack *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have explained—*[Interruption.]* Order. I have explained my position, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is not going to pursue a matter on which I have already ruled.

Mr. Jack: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I seek clarification. When my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) made a point of order from the Dispatch Box, the Leader of the

House was able, in a subsequent point of order, to respond. Given my concern about the issue that other right hon. and hon. Members have raised about the beef ban, would it be in order for the Minister of Agriculture, who is in the Chamber this evening, to respond, if he so wished, to my concern and that of other right hon. and hon. Members? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.]* Order, I am calling for order. The business before us is a petition. I call the hon. Member for Angus.

PETITION

Emergency Services

11.48 pm

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): We may now move into calmer waters, Mr. Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Will the hon. Gentleman please take a seat while other hon. Members leave the Chamber quietly?

Mr. Welsh: I beg leave to present a petition in the name of Mr. James Buchanan, signed by more than 40,000 residents—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. Members should not be standing while an hon. Gentleman is presenting a petition.

Mr. Welsh: The petition is signed by more than 40,000 residents of Angus and others. The petition declares that the law as it stands does not give the 999 emergency services adequate rights of assured access during their operations on behalf of the general public.

We all, in some way or other, rely on those emergency services—whether police, fire, ambulance or others—and all sensible motorists would, out of courtesy, give way to allow free passage to those services. Sadly, however, nowadays that courtesy is not always shown, and the petitioners want rights of access to emergency situations strengthened in the general public interest.

The petition states that:

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to introduce legislation which would force drivers to give way to emergency service vehicles in pursuit of their duties.

And the Petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Medicines Control Agency

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

11.50 pm

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): I wish to raise a matter that is of great concern to a number of my constituents in south Cumbria, although I am sure that, like me, they would have been happy to wait for a few more minutes if another matter of great concern to them, the future of the beef industry, had been the subject of a statement.

My first, and much happier, duty is belatedly to congratulate the Minister of State for Health on her much deserved promotion. I am sure that it is only a matter of time before she finds herself in an even more elevated position on the Government Front Bench.

The Minister might be wondering why I applied for the debate, given that, as she will know, the Government announced in July some concessions on the most controversial issue concerning the Medicines Control Agency, namely, the consultation document MLX 249. I say straight away that I very much welcome the concessions that Baroness Hayman announced in her press release of 15 July. None the less, there remain some ambiguities in the Government's position, and I know from representations made to me and to hon. Members on both sides of the House that some concerns remain. There have been a number of developments since July which may prove to be significant. Accordingly, I would like to press the Minister for whatever clarifications she may be able to give.

Perhaps I should also explain to the House that I have never, to my knowledge, used or consumed herbal remedies. Given that I have a number of close relatives who are general practitioners, nurses or surgeons in the national health service, my background is one that makes me much more sympathetic to, and understanding of, conventional rather than alternative medicine. However, I believe strongly in the principle that consumers should be able to decide these matters for themselves.

I welcome the statement that was included in the letter that Baroness Hayman wrote to hon. Members on 16 July. She said:

"The Government is committed to ensuring that consumer choice and the availability of health products are not restricted".

I hope that tonight we may be able to shed a little light on what the Government mean by that in practice.

I shall begin at the beginning. MLX 249, the Government's consultation document, appeared on 6 November last year. It included the Medicines Control Agency's letter proposing that the classification process for borderline substances be put on a statutory basis. Those are substances on the borderline between foods, which are regulated by the Food Safety Act 1990, and medicines, which are regulated by the Medicines Act 1968. A new statutory instrument was proposed to put the handling of those substances on a new basis.

There are serious implications for the reclassification of a health food as a medicine. Unless otherwise exempt, a medicinal product may not be placed on the United Kingdom market without a marketing authorisation or a product licence. That is granted by the licensing authority

[Mr. Tim Collins]

when it is satisfied that the product meets the prescribed standards for safety, quality and efficacy. The point is that there is no way in which the efficacy of many of those substances can be demonstrated, at least not by conventional medical means. Yet there are many people in my constituency and throughout the country who swear by many of those products and testify in great detail about the dramatic improvements in the quality of life that they have had since they began taking them.

At present, most of those products are classified as foods. As such, they are required by the Food Safety Act 1990 to be safe. Ironically, that is not a requirement which applies to a medicinal product, where frequently quite serious side effects may be contingent upon them. Furthermore, as they are classified as foods, those making and selling them are not permitted to make any claims on the packaging or in the advertising that they will improve people's health. In those circumstances, it seems that there is a strong argument for allowing consumers a continuing freedom of choice. However, if the MCA deems that something is a medicine, a licence is required. My hon. Friends tell me that the cost of obtaining one can sometimes be up to £150,000. That is a huge sum for the very small companies that are often involved in the health food business.

The original document caused widespread concern, among not only the health food industry but from many consumer groups. Perhaps at this point I should pay tribute, and express my gratitude, to Consumers for Health Choice, and Mr. Christopher Whitehouse in particular, for whose help in briefing me I am most grateful.

I was visited at one of my advice surgeries by Elizabeth Kan of Kan Foods of Kendal, by Penny Seeds of Living Well, which has a shop in Milnthorpe and another in Grange-over-Sands, and by others on a number of occasions. A large number of my constituents in south Cumbria also wrote to me on the matter and signed petitions in health food shops and elsewhere.

The concerns at that time related to the lack of an independent appeals body, the possibility that the burden of proof would be placed on the accused, so to speak, and the fact that the consultation period was too short. There were also fears about how the legislation would be interpreted. My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) raised the matter in an Adjournment debate in February this year. In July, when Baroness Hayman announced that the Government were shifting policy, she said that they would do so in three major areas: the review panel would be genuinely independent and would have statutory provision; the burden of proof would not, after all, be reversed; and the MCA would have to give full reasons for its decisions. That has been widely welcomed. I pay tribute to the effectiveness of the campaigns that were mounted, and to the fact that the Government have, however belatedly, shown a willingness to reflect on these matters and take a fresh look in the light of public representations.

However, some possible difficulties remain. I shall put to the Minister the fears of some of my constituents, with which I hope that she can deal relatively easily. Some people continue to believe that there is an implicit agenda to reclassify most or all herbal and health food products as medicines. They fear that lobbying by powerful pharmaceutical companies has led to steps designed to damage the growing health food sector, and that the Medicines Control Agency has a vested interest in redesignating health foods as medicines because it secures income each time an application must be made for a medicinal licence. I hope and believe that the Minister will be able to give firm reassurances to lay those fears to rest, and I would welcome her placing on the record a clear denial of those suggestions.

In July, the Government undertook to table a new statutory instrument to reflect the changes that they had agreed to make. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us tonight when that measure is likely to be published and when she would expect it to take effect. There remain a number of concerns about the possible content of the new statutory instrument.

Given the great importance attached to the Government's assurances earlier this year about the composition of the new statutory review panel, can the Minister give the House a specific assurance that the composition, role and functions of the new statutory review panel will be written into the statutory instrument, not simply left to later guidance notes? Can she also assure us that the review panel's composition, role and functions will not be amendable simply by a change in guidance notes, but will also require amendment to the statutory instrument? Naturally, there will be guidance notes for quite a complicated measure. Will they be made available at the same time as the statutory instrument?

Will the statutory instrument make it clear that the statutory review panel is the final decision-making body, or will it leave the MCA as the final judge and jury in its own case? If the MCA is to be given the residual power to make a final determination in extreme circumstances on clear public safety grounds—which I and many in the industry believe is a perfectly reasonable position—will that condition be written into the statutory instrument? In other words, will the circumstances in which the MCA may make a final determination be made explicit, and will it be clear that the MCA would be expected to overrule the review panel only in a small minority of cases?

Given that health food manufacturers are small companies, will the Government re-examine the original provision in MLX 249 for a mere two-week period to be allowed for a reply to be made to a provisional determination by the MCA that a substance is a medicine? The Minister will understand that, for many of the small companies operating in the sector, a fortnight's notice is unfair. If there is only one person dealing with compliance or regulation issues, as may be the case with some small health food operators, that person may be away on holiday, ill or travelling on business. A two-week period for a response is a tight timetable.

Can the Minister shed any further light on the answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), on 2 December to parliamentary questions tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean)? Those answers established that the Government are considering new regulations to cover herbal remedies following European Directive 99/83 EC, which was passed in September this year, and also that the MCA is to review its current list of specified and toxic herbs. Does the Minister expect those two processes to expand or reduce the range of herbal products available to consumers in the UK?

Will the Minister say a word about a matter that has caused great concern in my constituency? Penny Seeds of Living Well mentioned it to me earlier. The MCA has just written to food manufacturers to inform them that it proposes to designate as a medicine St. John's wort, the most popular herbal remedy in the UK at the moment. St. John's wort has been around in this country for many decades and has been used with success for a long time.

I am told that, ironically, the catalyst for the MCA's decision to seek classification of St. John's wort as a medicine was research published in the *British Medical Journal*, which established that the remedy's effectiveness in tackling depression may not be an old wives' tale after all, and may be medically provable. I hope that the Minister agrees that it would be the greatest irony of all if it turned out that the provision of scientific proof of the effectiveness of a herbal remedy led directly to the imposition of costly and difficult procedures, resulting in far fewer people gaining access to it than were able to do so when there was no scientific proof of its efficacy. What reassurances might the Minister be able to give?

I know that the Minister will appreciate that many of the problems stem from the fact that some of the products—whether we call them herbs, dietary supplements or health foods—are not easily classifiable, as either a food or a medicine. She will be aware that the industry believes that its future lies in the fast-growing sector of blended products, in which vitamins, minerals and, perhaps, amino acids are rolled together with a herbal remedy such as St. John's wort. If the herbal remedy element has to be licensed separately as a medicine, the whole range of multi-blend products have also to be licensed individually.

Would the Minister be prepared to consider seriously the suggestion floated earlier this year by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), the shadow Health Minister, that a new category should be created in which supplements could be grouped? She will know that the industry feels strongly on that point, too.

In such a category, there would be no requirements to prove the efficacy of the product, as there are at present, but instead a streamlined procedure for dealing with legitimate and important safety concerns. The proposal would ensure that the hundreds of supplements now available—their properties are often questioned by some, while others swear by them—would be protected and would remain available.

I know that the idea has been supported by many in the industry, and by many consumers too. It was also supported earlier today in conversations that I had with both consumers and sellers of such products in my constituency. Would not a new category of natural remedies, falling between food and medicine, be more accurate, lead to better regulation, and encourage the growth of a burgeoning sector that is much supported by people throughout the country? I invite the Minister to recognise the merits of something that we might both agree is the third way.

12.3 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) on having obtained this debate and on his speech, in which he detailed very clearly a list of very important questions about MLX 249 and developments under way in the Medicines Control Agency. I shall try to deal with the issues that he raised in turn. Rather than responding to all of them in sufficient detail, I shall also write to him on many of the matters to confirm the points that I have made and to clarify in further detail some other issues. I should point out that this area is the responsibility of my noble Friend Lord Hunt. I shall certainly pass the hon. Gentleman's comments on to him, as he considers these matters further.

The Medicines Control Agency is responsible for ensuring that medicines available to United Kingdom citizens are safe, of appropriate quality and effective. It regulates medicines in accordance with UK and Community medicines legislation through a system of granting and maintaining product licences, post-licensing surveillance, licensing and periodic inspection of manufacturers and wholesale dealers, and enforcement action against those who break the law.

The hon. Gentleman referred in particular to the MCA's MLX 249 proposals, whose purpose is to protect public health. They are intended to ensure that the agency gets its decisions right—in a transparent, open and fair way—and I welcome the points that he made about the aims and intentions of MLX 249. Of course, we need to avoid wrongly classifying any product as a medicine, but equally we have a duty to protect consumers by ensuring that all medicines are classified as such, so that the appropriate controls can be applied. The MCA is responsible, on behalf of the licensing authority, for implementing and enforcing the provisions of medicines legislation. That includes deciding whether a product is a medicine or not.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I am well aware of the concerns that were generated originally by the proposals, but much of the criticism misrepresented their aims and effects and was an unwarranted cause of worry to many people. Many of the responses at that stage were based on a fear that the proposals would change the status of dietary supplements and herbal remedies. That is simply not the case, and I shall return to the specific points that the hon. Gentleman made about herbal remedies. Allegations that vitamins and popular food supplements would become "medicines" overnight were, and are, emphatically untrue. The Government are committed to ensuring that consumer choice and the availability of health products are not restricted, so people will have a wide range of choices to make for themselves.

The definition of a medicinal product and the criteria against which the MCA must make such decisions are matters of European Community law. The proposals would not alter in any way the definition of a medicine or the criteria for deciding whether a product is a medicine or not. As the law stands, a product that is not clearly a food or a cosmetic is a medicinal product if claims are made that it can treat or prevent disease or if it may be administered with a view to restoring, correcting or modifying physiological functions. Such products are subject to the requirements of UK and EC medicines legislation and, as the hon. Gentleman said, normally require a marketing authorisation—a product licence—before they can be sold or supplied.

The consultation undertaken by the MCA has been genuine and the Government have listened to the concerns that were expressed. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's

[Yvette Cooper]

comments in that respect and on the Government's response. As he said, my noble Friend Baroness Hayman was able to announce on 16 July that three important changes would be made to the proposals: first, full reasons would be given in writing for MCA decisions; secondly, the advisory panel to review MCA provisional decisions would be independent of the MCA; and thirdly, the burden of proof in any court proceedings would be borne by the MCA, not the defendant company, as was originally proposed. It has been possible to make those changes without prejudicing our commitment to protect public health and consumers.

The hon. Gentleman made a series of points and I shall try to answer as many as I can, but I hope that he will forgive me if I come back to him on those that I do not cover this evening. He asked when the relevant statutory instrument would be put before the House and what its content and composition would be. I must refer him to my noble Friend Lord Hunt for further details, although the matter is being considered by Ministers and I can tell him that we intend to introduce the final legislative package later this month.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the review panel. The MCA is inviting nominations to it from interested organisations and will shortly begin discussions with trade associations and consumer groups on the draft guidance that will support the legislation. He also referred to the two-week timetable for notice of wish to review. I can tell him that that has changed to four weeks, following representations from the trade associations. He also mentioned St. John's wort, which has been classified as a medicine in the UK for at least two years. It is widely available as an exempt herbal remedy. There is no intention to change the status of herbal remedies. So long as there is nothing on the packaging about promoting health or about their efficacy, they will retain their current status as a herbal remedy.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the independent review panel or the MCA, on behalf of the licensing authority, will have the final say. The MCA must have the final say. If it cannot accept the review panel's advice, as the competent authority, it must retain the right to make the final decision. Although that may hardly ever happen, it could be challenged by judicial review. The final decision must rest with the MCA.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether there could be a third way, as he described it, and whether dietary supplements and herbal remedies, or combinations of both, could be described as neither foods nor medicines, but as something in between. That has been suggested. I am aware that the legislation for dietary supplements in the USA, and initiatives currently being pursued in Australia and Canada, have been held up as possible models for the development of such a regime. We have no plans to review the way in which supplements are regulated in the UK, but we are following developments on those initiatives with interest.

There are indications that the USA legislation allows some potent products, such as herbal ephedrine, on to the market with very little control. Details of the new regimes in Australia and Canada have yet to be finalised, but it appears that both will involve pre-market assessment and licensing of products. Indeed, in Australia all supplements will be classed as medicines. If that is the case, the controls could turn out to be more restrictive than those that currently apply to supplements sold as foods in the UK.

Any such change would require action at the European level. The legal position on borderline products is ultimately governed by the definition of a medicinal product in EC directive 65/65. There are no proposals to change that definition either by member states or by the Commission. Should a debate begin, the UK would consult widely and participate fully.

Mr. Collins: The hon. Lady rightly refers to the original European directive 65/65, which dates back to 1965. It is about as old as the hon. Lady and me, so perhaps it is time to have a look at it. Will she make the case in the Council of Ministers for at least considering these matters 34 years on, because much has changed in this field in that time?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is right that much has changed since then, and I shall reflect on the points that he has made.

As for food or dietary supplements, the Government have made it clear that any maximum limits on the vitamin and mineral content of supplements should be based on safety considerations.

I am aware that I have not responded fully to many of the points that the hon. Gentleman made, and I shall write to him. I shall also pass on his comments to Lord Hunt. We have ensured that our final proposals go no further than our obligations as the licensing authority to protect public health. Our aim is to promote, both in the UK and Europe, a regulatory environment in which safe supplements are widely available, the public are not put at risk or misled, and medicines law is effectively and promptly enforced. We want to encourage consumer choice in these areas. The Government will take note of the views expressed by the hon. Gentleman.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fourteen minutes past Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Thursday 9 December 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Competition (Regulations)

1. **Mr. Michael Fallon** (Sevenoaks): What account he has taken in his research into international comparative prices of the effect of regulations affecting business. [100524]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): The aim of the research into international price comparisons is to show whether prices differ, not why they differ. If the results do show that British consumers are paying more for goods than consumers elsewhere, we will need to identify the reasons why, including the possible effects of regulation.

Mr. Fallon: Does the Secretary of State agree with the recent survey by the Forum of Private Business, which puts the cost of complying with all the new Labour red tape—working time directive, holiday pay and all the rest of it—at some £4,500 a year? That is a huge burden on village shops and very small businesses. Instead of the right hon. Gentleman getting himself into a lather about rip-off capitalists, why do we not have a rip-up Government who can get rid of the 2,700 regulations that he has been piling on business in the past two and a half years?

Mr. Byers: It ill becomes someone who was a Minister before the 1992 general election—before the good folk of Darlington had the sense to vote him out of office—to ask that question, when the Conservative Government introduced 10,000 regulations between 1994 and 1996. Indeed, in the Queen's Speech debate, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), an ex-Minister, admitted that the Conservatives could have done a lot more to reduce red tape.

What is interesting about the hon. Gentleman's question is that he is confusing red tape with minimum standards. He talks about the national minimum wage and the working time regulations—those are all entitlements and benefits that individuals receive; they are not bureaucracy or red tape.

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): I welcome the Government's determination to make work pay. Does my right hon. Friend believe that as the Conservative party is so concerned about regulation, it would scrap the working families tax credit, the national minimum wage and all the other positive moves that the Government have made, which would obviously be to the detriment of millions of people throughout the country?

Mr. Byers: I agree with my hon. Friend. She has highlighted the confusion in the mind of the Conservative party, which cannot distinguish between, on one hand, lifting bureaucracy from business and cutting red tape and, on the other, basic entitlements and minimum standards for people in the workplace. There is a legitimate need to cut red tape, but there is also a need to ensure that we provide minimum standards for people in work, through the working families tax credit, the working time regulations and the national minimum wage—all of which would be placed at risk under the policies of the Conservative party.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): On 16 December, the Secretary of State is due to receive the report from the Competition Commission on an examination of the pricing of cars. In the press last week, when the right hon. Gentleman was asked by the industry to give an early response to that paper, he said that if a formal request was made, he would speed that up. Will he take my request this morning as a formal request? Whatever the outcome of the report, it is imperative that the retail car industry can get on and sell cars. The industry accepts that there may be some criticism, but what is damaging it now is the fact that people are waiting for the Secretary of State's report to be concluded and announced.

If the right hon. Gentleman delays his response much after Christmas, it will do untold damage to retailers selling cars in this country, because we then approach March, with the new registration. I hope that he can reassure us this morning.

Mr. Byers: For the record, it is not my report; it is the report of the Competition Commission, which is independent, and I have no control over when that report might be received. I understand that the commission has recently received representations from some major motor manufacturers about the remedies that have been proposed, so I believe that difficult issues are involved.

I want to get this matter right, which means that I shall consider the commission's report when I receive it. I understand the urgency of taking decisions, but this is a fundamental review of the pricing of cars—the first for decades—and we must take our time to ensure that we get it right, instead of taking a rushed decision that would not meet needs. It ill becomes the hon. Lady to criticise, when the Government of whom she was a Member did absolutely nothing about the needs of consumers.

We are taking action. We are looking, through the Competition Commission, into cars and into supermarkets, because we believe that the consumer should have a fair deal. That is our objective, and we shall achieve it.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): Last Friday, I had a meeting with the local chamber of commerce in my area—one of a series of regular meetings. At that meeting,

the concern on regulation that was expressed, especially by smaller businesses, was not necessarily that regulations exist, but that they are so complex and difficult for small businesses to understand. Will my right hon. Friend consider streamlining the complexity of regulations and perhaps work with small businesses to put them into a format that would be user friendly to small businesses and reduce the amount of time that proprietors spend trying to understand the regulations? I am sure that something could be done.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the need to simplify the regulations. The Government would certainly support such an approach. We do not support the Conservative party's approach, which is not about cutting red tape, but about cutting paid holiday entitlement for workers; not about lifting the burden of bureaucracy, but about denying the national minimum wage to more than 1.5 million people. The Conservative party has not learned any lessons—it is a modern Conservative party for the few, not for the many. This Christmas, when people receive their paid holiday entitlement, they need to recognise that that would be taken away from them by the Scrooges on the Opposition Benches.

Small Firms (Payroll)

2. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): What plans the Government have to assist small firms with the cost and administration of their payroll. [100525]

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): Last month, my hon Friend the Financial Secretary and I announced that we would be providing extra help for new small businesses running their own payrolls by expanding the new enterprise support initiative.

Mr. Chope: That is a very disingenuous response from the Minister. In the 1998 Budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer promised that, by April 1999, there would be a national automated payroll service in place for small businesses. In the 1999 Budget, he promised that £40 million would be invested to help small businesses in that way. Now the Government's policy is an absolute shambles. Does the Minister agree that the best way forward, bearing in mind the additional burdens of administering the working families tax credit, would be to allow all small businesses to deduct 1 per cent. of their pay-as-you-earn and national insurance contributions at source to meet some of the administrative costs that they have to bear to finance the Government's ludicrously high taxation programme?

Ms Hewitt: We did exactly what every sensible business does—we asked our customers how best we could help them. Our customers, the small businesses, told us that they prefer on-going, one-to-one help rather than one-off support. That is precisely why we are expanding the excellent service that the Inland Revenue offers through the new enterprise support initiative. That is what small businesses want.

As for the working families tax credit, we have made it clear that the average cost for a small business with a working families tax credit employee will amount to £37 a year. The Conservative party would deny nearly 1.5 million people the considerable help that they will get through the tax credit.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My hon. Friend referred to the working families tax credit, which I strongly support and welcome. However, does she believe that some businesses are suffering cashflow problems as a result of the introduction of the credit through the payroll system? Does she think that steps need to be taken to resolve such difficulties? The scheme is in its early stages and we need to ensure that it is right and does not cause major problems for small firms.

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend the Paymaster General and the Inland Revenue have been working very closely with small businesses to ensure that the administration of the tax credit through the payroll system is as simple and efficient as possible. As part of the those discussions, the Inland Revenue will put in place arrangements to assist businesses which need it with cashflow support.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): It is not just the working families tax credit that has to be paid through the payroll of small businesses; there are other items that the Government expect small business to administer on their behalf. For example, they include the recoupment of student loans and stakeholder pensions. What other plans does the Minister have for businesses to use their payroll systems as a benefits agency on behalf of government? Why is it necessary for stakeholder pensioners to be administered through the payroll? Surely that is not necessary; it is just an additional burden on small businesses.

Ms Hewitt: It was, of course, the previous Government who imposed on many employers the responsibility to deduct child support payments through the payroll. Every Member will be aware from their constituency surgeries of the complete shambles that we have inherited in the Child Support Agency, and are now having to put right.

We are working closely with business to ensure both minimum standards for employees and efficient administration of regulations and of payroll. We are determined to get intelligent and effective regulation and good support for business in this country.

Energy Supplies

3. **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster** (Hastings and Rye): What action he is taking to ensure that consumers are able to change their energy supplier more easily. [100526]

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): The Government are concerned that some customers find it difficult to switch supplier. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has therefore announced a research study to look at consumer motivations for and against switching supplier, so that everyone can benefit from the considerable savings that are to be made.

Mr. Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response, particularly her comment about setting up an inquiry. Will that inquiry take account of those with pre-payment meters, which are used by many people in

my constituency who are on low incomes and who, unlike people who pay by direct debit, have not been invited to take part in the new competition possibilities?

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend makes an important point. If customers are able to switch suppliers, they can save about £65 on their annual gas bill and £20 on their annual electricity bill. Many people with pre-payment meters lose out on those opportunities and, indeed, end up having to pay more for the privilege of using such a meter.

The Director-General of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets has already announced in his social action plan that he wants to investigate pre-payment meters. One of the problems associated with such meters is that many of the people who use them are in debt, and the companies prevent the transfer of anyone who is in debt. In the past year, some half a million transfers were stopped by gas suppliers and 80,000 by electricity suppliers because of debt. That is an important issue because people should be able to reap the benefits of competition. It is also important to try to end the scourge of fuel poverty.

Metrication

5. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will make a statement on his policy on metrication. [100528]

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): The Government are taking forward the policy adopted by successive Governments since 1965 of overseeing the change to metric units as the primary system of measurement in the United Kingdom. A report by my Department on the progress since 1965, particularly regarding goods sold by weight or measure, was placed in the Library of the House on 23 July.

Mr. Swayne: That is most regrettable. After the end of this month, Madam Speaker, if you were to go to a market trader and ask him for a pound of apples, and he indulged you by weighing out a pound of appels and selling them to you, he would be committing a criminal offence. What measures has the Minister taken, what effort has she expended and to what lengths did she go to extend the life of the current derogation that we enjoy in respect of the sale of loose goods?

Mrs. Liddell: We are at the dawn of a new century, but sometimes I think that the hon. Gentleman, instead of looking forward to a knowledge-based society in the 21st century, would rather cling to the 19th century. The House recommended metrication in 1862, and the changes that are to take place at the end of December were introduced in 1994 by the previous Government—a Government whom, I understand, the hon. Gentleman supported. However, given that the campaign that he now supports is being promoted by the UK Independence party, I wonder whether we are seeing more divisions among Conservative Members than have hitherto been apparent.

There have been discussions with the European Union about the 10-year extension. I say to the hon. Gentleman, however, that 99 per cent. of retailers are ready to switch on 31 December 1999. It is regrettable that the hon. Gentleman has not got his act together sufficiently to enable him to switch on that date.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there is genuine unhappiness, particularly among traders in my area, about enforced metrication? Is she further aware that the crucial directive that enforced metrication, which is still playing out today, was issued in December 1979, and that translating that directive into statute was one of the early actions of the Thatcher Government? The directive was further amended 10 years later and again in 1994. The brunt of the responsibility for metrication should therefore be borne by the Conservatives, not Labour.

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend does well in pointing out the rather hypocritical position adopted by some of the opponents of metrication. I recognise the anxieties of some—particularly small—retailers about the change. That is why the Department of Trade and Industry has conducted an extensive publicity campaign. Trading standards officers stand ready to give any assistance required. We are encouraged by the fact that almost 99 per cent. of all retailers are prepared for the switch on 31 December.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Does the right hon. Lady recognise how inappropriate it is to use penalties which were designed to deal with fraud against small businesses which offer their customers some freedom of choice in how loose and bulk goods are measured? In recognising the difficulties presented by what happened under the previous Government, will she take any remaining opportunities to achieve some continuing security from prosecution for fraud for small business men who are trying to help their customers to deal with a difficult situation?

Mrs. Liddell: The right hon. Gentleman raises a point that has been raised on many occasions in this Parliament. Indeed, since the Magna Carta there has been legislation to ensure that legally defined units of measurement are available. If we do not have a means of ensuring that, customers could be given short measure. It is important to protect consumers, and we recognise that we must.

At the same time, we are giving considerable assistance to retailers to ensure that they are able to offer the service from 31 December. Indeed, anyone who asks for a pound of apples, as the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) suggested, will be in no difficulty whatever. The consumer will be able to ask for goods in imperial measure, and retailers will be able to measure in metric amounts. Everything possible has been done to allow the switch to be as easy as possible. This has been a long time coming and there have been plenty of opportunities for preparation. I remind Opposition Members that it was the previous Government who introduced the measures in 1994.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Is the Minister aware—it seems from her answers that she is not—of the confusion and difficulty faced by many elderly shoppers and, indeed, by people who are not so elderly, in buying cheese, fish or fruit in kilograms? She says that responsibility lies with the previous

Government, but they introduced a 10-year derogation in 1989, which expires at the end of this year. Her Government have been in office since 1997, just when negotiations should have started again. Why did not her Department even bother to request from the EU another 10-year derogation on loose and bulk sales? Is this yet another example of this Government's weak approach to fighting for British interests in Europe?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman should not write his notes the night before; he should listen to what is said. In 1994, his Government introduced the order that comes into effect on 31 December 1999. I have also pointed out to the hon. Member for New Forest, West that the consumer—elderly or otherwise—will be able to go into any shop and ask for goods in imperial measures.

I was intrigued this morning to read in *The Times* an article attacking the measure by someone who knows Immanuel Kant rather better than the closing days of the 20th century. He suggests that the imperial measure is the lingua franca of both recipe and school books. It must be a long time since he has cooked a dinner, because recipe books give weights in both imperial and metric measures, as do school books nowadays.

EU/UK Balance of Trade

6. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): What has been the cumulative balance of trade with the EU since Britain joined that organisation; and if he will make a statement. [100529]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): There has been a deficit of £130 billion.

Sir Teddy Taylor: As the trade deficit with Europe has been absolutely horrendous over the years, will the right hon. Gentleman take steps to remind the Government of France that if, as a consequence of their illegal action on beef, British consumers turn against French products, the people and industry of France will suffer? Will he do all in his power to promote free and fair trade, and not restricted trade?

Mr. Byers: On the action of the French Cabinet yesterday evening, the French need to be reminded that the EU is not like some Woolworth's pick-and-mix counter, where they can choose some regulations with which they agree, but not others with which they do not. Law, science and—I think—good taste is on our side on this issue. We shall now try to negotiate a settlement with the French Government. They have not been prepared to accept that, so we must ensure that the Commission exercises its legal powers. I understand that it intends to do so and to take the French Government to court.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not good for trade in the European Union or anywhere else when the European Commission takes an inordinately long time to complete inquiries? Does he share my concern that, despite the fact that the details of the recommended aid package between BMW-Rover and the Government have been with the EU for some time, a decision still has not been made? Does he recognise that in the west midlands there is a great deal of concern about the possibility that the goal posts are being moved? Can he assure me that we are doing all we can to expedite the matter and ensure that a decision is made as soon as possible?

Mr. Byers: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I spoke yesterday to Commissioner Monti, the Competition Commissioner, who deals with these matters, specifically about the application to provide aid to BMW in relation to Rover at Longbridge, and I stressed to him the urgency of arriving at a decision.

There is some time available, though. I have discussed the matter with BMW, which will be content provided that a decision is taken within the next six months. We need to make sure that the Commission treats the application fairly. I believe that it will do so. It must go through the usual procedures, and that is what is happening. Provided that we get a decision, probably before May or June next year, there is no reason why the aid should be threatened, as that is the sort of time scale to which BMW is working as well.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is hardly necessary to blame Brussels or Paris for the large cumulative trade deficit, which is due to prolonged lack of competitiveness of British industry? Looking to the future, does he agree with the assessment of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, confirmed by the House of Commons Library, that British manufacturing has suffered a decline in competitiveness of 12 per cent. since the Government came into office because of exchange rate changes, and 25 per cent. since the end of 1996? Or does he agree with the comment made during the week and attributed to the Prime Minister, which may well have been inaccurately reported, that Britain now has a competitive exchange rate? To which of those two views does he subscribe?

Mr. Byers: From my conversations with many manufacturers, it is clear that they know that the rate of sterling is linked to the fact that we have a strong and growing economy, which is reflected in sterling. They have improved their productivity and, as a result, many manufacturers can compete globally. The latest figures for manufacturing for the last two quarters show that there has been a real improvement.

It is important to bear in mind that more than half of the deficit was accumulated between 1986 and 1990. In that five-year period, well over £60 billion of the deficit was accumulated. That was in the middle of the Lawson boom, when we sucked in exports and did not use the opportunity to improve our economic base. This Government do not intend to make those mistakes. We are steering a course of stability to ensure that we continue to have economic growth and prosperity for all our people.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): On the issue of fair competition, down the years many people in the United Kingdom shipbuilding industry have complained about the lack of fairness, largely because of the hidden subsidies given to shipyards elsewhere in the

European Union. Is my right hon. Friend satisfied that no hidden subsidies are now being given to shipbuilding yards in other member states of the EU?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. Like him, I represent a shipbuilding constituency, so we share a concern about those matters. One of the actions that I have been pleased to take as Secretary of State was to alter the way in which the shipbuilding intervention fund can be used. The changes that we have introduced will benefit not just shipbuilding, but conversion work. That has allowed a number of significant orders to be achieved by yards in the UK. I believe that shipbuilding, ship repair and ship conversion have a real future, especially if there are increases in global trade. I will do all I can to make sure that there is fair competition, that we can support the industry in the UK and that there are no unfair subsidies in other countries.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The Secretary of State's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) showed clearly that many people exaggerate the share of Britain's trade with the European Union. We, probably more than our European partners, also look to the dollar zone—especially to the United States—for our trade. What analysis has the Department carried out on how the balance of our trade between the euro and dollar zones ties in with pressures on our currency? If the United Kingdom were part of the euro zone, we would face different trade pressures from the rest of the European Union. Will the Secretary of State explain how the different trade patterns fit the economic tests that the Chancellor set for the United Kingdom joining the euro?

Mr. Byers: We know that the hon. Gentleman would like to rule out joining the single currency. That is not the view of the Leader of the Opposition, but it is the hon. Gentleman's position and that of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning). It would be interesting to know how they reconcile their personal views with those of the Leader of the Opposition. The hon. Gentleman does not like to be reminded of his principled position on the single currency.

To answer the hon. Gentleman's specific question, the latest figures show that 58 per cent. of all United Kingdom exports are to the European Union, whereas only 55 per cent. of imports into the United Kingdom come from the European Union. There are benefits from that. The deficit that I mentioned earlier is largely due to decisions that the Conservative Government made between 1986 and 1990. The danger of the approach that the hon. Gentleman advocates is that, if it were adopted, the United Kingdom would no longer be the leading place for inward investment from Japan and the United States. He wants to renegotiate our position in relation to the European Union, but that would put thousands of jobs at risk. The Government will put the national interest first, and not rely on political dogma.

Part-time Work

7. **Mr. Barry Gardiner** (Brent, North): What measures he has taken to improve working conditions for part–time workers. [100531]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): The Government have improved the working conditions of part-timers—and full-timers—significantly. We have introduced the working time regulations and the national minimum wage. New rights to parental leave and maternity leave will come into force in the next few days. We intend to take that work forward through implementing the part-time work directive, which will end the less favourable treatment of part-time employees in the few places where that persists. It will also raise the status and availability of part-time work. We are committed to implementing the part-time work directive by the 7 April deadline, and we shall issue a consultation document shortly.

Mr. Gardiner: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and congratulate him on the work to extend maternity leave and part-time workers' right to time off for domestic emergencies. That will make a huge difference to women. How does my hon. Friend propose further to increase the status and availability of part-time work, which would benefit many women?

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which the social partners in Europe have discussed. One of the reasons for considering not only protection for part-time workers but the possibility of extending part-time work is the view that, in many companies, part-timers were employed on some of the basic grades, but found that there were no promotion opportunities unless they became full time. That is one of the anomalies that we shall tackle in the review.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Given that hundreds of jobs have been lost in the hosiery and knitwear industry in recent weeks, does the Minister accept that conditions of work are not the only matter on the minds of part-time and full-time workers in my constituency this Christmas? Since the Government came to power, 70,000 jobs have been lost in the clothing and textile industries. Does the Minister know that a petition presented to Parliament in July on behalf of my constituents and forwarded to the Secretary of State was not even acknowledged? That has enraged my constituents in the hosiery industry. Does the Minister accept that there is a perception among hosiery and knitwear workers in my constituency in Leicestershire and in the east midlands that, while the Government are prepared to go the extra mile for the motor industry, and perhaps even for farming, hosiery and knitwear are seen as a twilight industry and the Secretary of State and his colleagues are not prepared to help? Will the Minister give a personal assurance that he will ask the Secretary of State to consider seriously the desperate plight of the hosiery and knitwear industry in my constituency and the east midlands?

Mr. Johnson: I shall look into the point that the hon. Gentleman raises about the petition. There has certainly been no deliberate decision by my Department not to do him the courtesy of responding. In terms of what we are doing for textile and hosiery workers, the industry faces important problems, which is exactly why we have set up a task force—which will report next week—and why industry representatives sit with me on the textiles and clothing strategy group to look precisely at how we can

ensure that there is greater competition. I say to Conservative Members that British industry will be able to compete not by failing to protect workers in the workplace, but by making sure that business is more competitive.

Angela Smith (Basildon): Like my constituents, I welcome my hon. Friend's comments about increasing the rights of full-time and part-time workers, but is he aware that many people do not know about the increase in rights under this Government? Numerous people have contacted me as their Member of Parliament to ask what rights they have at work and how they have increased. Some employers are not passing that information on to their employees, so may I urge my hon. Friend and other Ministers to take every possible action to ensure that people at work are aware of their rights?

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend raises a serious point. We are looking at how we can best ensure that people at work are aware of new rights in this country. We have set up helplines for the working time regulations and the minimum wage, and intend to do the same for the part-time work directive. We have also taken an initiative to ensure that members of ethnic minorities understand their rights to the minimum wage, because there was evidence to suggest that, when we launched it, we did not reach the media and radio stations used by Afro-Caribbean, Hindu and other ethnic minority people. We shall work hard to ensure that workers are aware of their rights.

Banking (Cash Withdrawals)

8. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What plans he has to increase consumer protection within the banking system relating to cash withdrawals. [100532]

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): We consider that consumers should be told in advance of any charges that they may face when they use cash machines, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has written to the British Bankers Association to make that clear. We hope that the trade will reach a voluntary agreement. If it does not, my right hon. Friend will consider using his powers under the Prices Act 1974 to require price transparency.

Mr. Baker: I agree with the point about price transparency, but does the Minister share my concern about the proposals for the introduction of further charges by banks, particularly Barclays, for making withdrawals from cash dispensers? Is it not ironic that those same banks are closing branches, including one in Ringmer in my constituency, and therefore making the use of competitors' cash machines even more necessary? Will he prevent the banks, if possible, from introducing further charges? If he cannot lean on them to persuade them to abandon their greed, will he take action to prevent them from introducing such charges?

Mr. Caborn: We do not believe that that is the right way to go. We are looking to the British Bankers Association and the trade itself to produce a voluntary code, and competition will make sure that the customer gets a reasonable deal. If we find that there has been any deviation from that, we shall use the powers at my right hon. Friend's disposal to ensure that the consumer gets the best deal.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am sure that the Minister appreciates that the Post Office network will close down if the Government continue with their policy of doing away with the payment of benefits through post offices. Will he look carefully at the charges being made on people who simply want to use a bank to cash their giro in one go? The banks are clearly putting up their charges and the Post Office is the cheapest way of delivering that service. I believe that the Minister will not want to inflict on the Post Office network damage similar to that which his colleagues in the Department of Social Security are about to cause. He needs to take action before it is too late.

Mr. Caborn: First, the systems that are in place are being automated and, secondly, because of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has expressed, the performance and innovation unit is looking at many of those issues. We shall come back to the House in the not-too-distant future to answer the serious questions that he raises.

Banking Services

9. **Ms Helen Southworth** (Warrington, South): If he will make a statement about the use of post offices to enable access to banking services for people with low incomes. [100533]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): The Post Office already has arrangements with the Alliance and Leicester Giro bank, the Co-operative bank and Lloyds TSB, enabling customers of those banks to undertake a range of transactions at post offices. It is intended that the Post Office will extend its commercial arrangements with banks; and the automated Horizon system, which is to be installed at all post offices, will have suitable banking technology to enable all Post Office customers to have access to banking services at post office counters.

Ms Southworth: I thank my hon. Friend for that welcome reply. Does my hon. Friend agree that, while high street banks are closing all over the place, denying people access to local banking services, the Post Office network is ideally situated to fill that gap? Will he ensure that the investment is available, automation takes place quickly, and Government Departments work positively together; and that business opportunities are made available so that every post office is economically viable and can provide locally those new services that people want locally?

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Over the past 20 years, there has been a decline of about 20 per cent. in the Post Office network. Sixty per cent. of villages have a post office, while only 5 per cent. have a bank. By automating the network, by bringing it on line, we can bring network banking back to deprived urban areas as well as rural areas. Further to a previous question, if the major high street banks start charging to withdraw cash

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from cash machines, that will provide an even greater opportunity for the Post Office, which is ubiquitous with a capital U, to take advantage of those circumstances.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Will the Minister's Department reconsider the damaging policy of compulsory automatic credit transfer being introduced in 2003? Unfortunately, it will mean closing at least 50 per cent. of post offices and small shops in rural Wales, in addition to the one in every 18 that has closed since the Government took power. It is a serious position. Yesterday, the Prime Minister acknowledged that there are problems in rural areas. I wonder how the Government's policy will assist those problems. In particular, what will be the view of the social exclusion unit?

Mr. Johnson: Social exclusion is crucial to all these matters. Financial exclusion is both a cause and an effect of social exclusion. Ensuring that people have access to bank accounts is an important principle that has been highlighted by the social exclusion report. If we sit back and do nothing, the gradual migration of customers to automatic credit transfer will mean a decline in the Post Office network. Introducing the automation of the network, setting up the performance and innovation unit study that will report to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister early in the new year and guaranteeing that, whatever happens after 2003, customers will still be able to draw their benefits in cash across a post office counter, are important developments and assurances. We either do something about the gradual erosion of our Post Office network or we sit back and do nothing. We are taking the option of protecting the network. This is an opportunity for the Post Office, not a threat.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): I welcome the Government's stated commitment to the maintenance of a nationwide network of post offices. Does my hon. Friend agree that a sub-post office is often vital in keeping active a village community and urban district centres? Will he examine the way in which the Post Office maintains its franchises with sub-post offices to ensure that those post offices and district centres can remain open so that the Government's stated commitment to a nationwide service becomes a reality?

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend is right about the importance of the Post Office network to the social fabric of this country. As for the relationship between the Post Office and sub-postmasters, the Post Office makes every attempt to keep a post office service going, even in areas where it cannot attract staff to run a local post office. There are mobile post offices, post offices that are run from people's homes and others that are run from garden sheds just to keep the service going.

We are committed to maintaining a national network of post offices. We are committed to ending the decline. We are committed also to ensuring that, when people go to their local post office, they will have a greater range of services available to them as a result of putting the Post Office on line and through the Horizon platform, which will be completed,by the spring of 2001.

Dairy Industry

10. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): If he will make a statement on monopolies in the dairy industry. [100534]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): The recent Monopolies and Mergers Commission report found that Milk Marque was using uncompetitive practices to exploit its monopoly position. I am pleased that the members of Milk Marque have agreed to establish three successor bodies.

Mr. Paterson: Processing milk on the continent is twice as efficient as in this country because companies such as MD Foods in Denmark, Parmalat and Danone are based on large farmer co-operatives with a substantial hold of their national milk market. The Government are determined to smash up Milk Marque—although it falls under the European definition of a monopoly—at vast legal expense. How will successor companies ever get up to European standards of efficiency when they will be so much smaller?

Mr. Byers: I know that the hon. Gentleman does not like facts that get in the way of his prejudice, but may I inform him that the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report said that there should be a compulsory break-up of Milk Marque? I did not agree with that. I said that the auction practices should be changed. It is the members of Milk Marque who have voluntarily agreed to break it up into three successor bodies. I have said clearly that, provided that they act in a competitive way—I have asked the Director General of Fair Trading to look at the matter during the next few months—from April, I am prepared to agree that they can get into processing.

That is my commitment; that is my decision. It reflects the fact that it was the Conservatives who, when they moved away from the Milk Marketing Board, required that Dairy Crest, the processing arm, be separated from Milk Marque. That was the Conservative Government's decision. The present Government have acted in the interests of the dairy industry.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): The Secretary of State's position will be welcomed by both customers and farmers, but the Milk Marketing Board was set up precisely because, during the 1920s, the whole industry was devastated by industrial practices that wiped out any protection for producers or customers. I hope that he will at least keep a sharp eye on developments in the successor companies to ensure that we do not damage the dairy industry even further.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point. A balance can be struck between protecting the industry, allowing it to become more competitive by letting it get into processing—I welcome the opportunity of giving it that agreement—and reflecting the needs of the consumer. I happen to think that a competitive dairy industry will be able to provide consumers with a quality product at a good

and affordable price. Those are my objectives. The procedures that have been agreed voluntarily by the farmers themselves will be the best way forward.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): The Secretary of State will know that there is some concern among dairy farmers that the break-up of Milk Marque into three parts rather than two may make them unviable or make one particular area less viable. Will he assure the House that he will monitor, or ask the Office of Fair Trading to monitor, the position carefully? If it looks as though the decision to split into three, rather than two, will jeopardise certain regions, will he be flexible enough to allow some form of amalgamation to take place before more dairy farmers have to sell up and get out of farming?

Mr. Byers: We need to be absolutely clear. The decision to break Milk Marque up into three successor bodies was taken by the members of Milk Marque themselves, not by the Government. The Government looked at the MMC recommendation, which was for a compulsorily break-up, and said no. That was my decision, but the members of Milk Marque have now made that decision. It is arrogant in the extreme for Conservative Members to try to overrule the decisions of members of Milk Marque. It is their decision and I welcome the fact they have now agreed to go into three successor bodies.

Manufacturing Sector

11. **Mr. Andrew Reed** (Loughborough): What research he has undertaken into the prospects for a successful manufacturing sector in the knowledge-driven economy. [100535]

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): Last month, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry published "Manufacturing in the Knowledge Driven Economy", which celebrates the success of some of our leading manufacturing companies and sets out our strategy for further increasing the competitiveness and productivity of our manufacturing industry.

Mr. Reed: I thank the Minister for that reply and for the Government's commitment to manufacturing industry, perhaps particularly to the textile sector. Does she acknowledge that a knowledge-based economy and manufacturing are not opposites, but that development of such an economy is the only way in which British manufacturing will be able to survive?

Does the Minister also recognise the severe problems facing the textile sector? When the report is produced next week, will she consider ways of ensuring that—particularly in Leicestershire, where the textile sector is suffering because of the changes that Marks and Spencer is making in its sourcing policies—those textile jobs are protected for the future? Does she also acknowledge that successful companies such as Datalink—which will open tomorrow in my constituency—are examples of manufacturing companies that invest in the knowledge-based economy?

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I look forward to visiting his constituency tomorrow and opening Datalink Electronics. However, as an east midlands Member of Parliament, I also share his concern about conditions in the textile industry. Recently, I visited Richard Roberts, whose headquarters is in my constituency and who is directly affected by the decision at Marks and Spencer.

As my hon. Friend said, next week we shall receive the draft report of the textiles industry strategy group. I look forward to discussing with employers and unions how we can further support the textile industry in making the necessary investments to ensure that it remains competitive in an increasingly competitive market.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Further to the truly risible response earlier to my hon. Friends the Members for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) and for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), does the Minister agree that crucial to the future success of the manufacturing sector in a knowledge-driven economy is a light-touch regulatory environment? To that end, will the hon. Lady tell us what assessment she has made of the American model, in the form of the Regulatory Flexibility Act 1980 and of the Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Fairness Act 1996, and will she immediately announce the conclusions of her assessment—or is she just another part-time Minister?

Ms Hewitt: I understand that the hon. Gentleman's favourite word, at least for this week, is "risible", and I have no doubt that he will be able to explain why. I also know that he is a great fan of sunset clauses, and therefore hope that he will welcome the fact that I have included a sunset clause in the Electronic Communications Bill, which recently received its Second Reading. The new small business service which I am in the process of establishing will have a particular responsibility for helping to streamline United Kingdom regulations and for ensuring that burdens on small businesses are kept to the necessary minimum.

South Africa (Trade)

12. **Mr. Ian Davidson** (Glasgow, Pollok): If he will make a statement on the implications for the UK of the EU agreement on trade with South Africa. [100536]

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): The European Union is South Africa's major trading partner, and the agreement will strengthen that relationship and create new opportunities for United Kingdom and South African companies to do business with each other. For those reasons, the Government strongly support the conclusion of the agreement.

Mr. Davidson: Does the Minister accept that the United Kingdom has a particular responsibility to try to create a prosperous post-apartheid South Africa because of the previous Conservative Government's long-term support for the apartheid state? What specifically are the United Kingdom Government doing to go that extra mile, to ensure that we play our part in trying to create more jobs, employment and prosperity in South Africa?

Mr. Caborn: Our Prime Minister went that extra mile at Berlin, where, because of his initiative, the agreement was made. Although we should have liked the agricultural

sector to go a little further than it did, the lead given by our Prime Minister in Berlin is clearly paying dividends in our now very strong relationship with South Africa. That lead was evident also at Seattle and in the Commonwealth, and I am sure that it will pay dividends in the future.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Despite the Minister's risible claims about the Government's close relations with our European brothers and sisters on the continent, will he confirm whether British beef may be exported to South Africa under the agreement?

Mr. Caborn: The answer is no at the moment. A scientific team from South Africa was in this country a few weeks ago and it is now reporting to the South African Cabinet. I hope that we shall get an agreement to export beef to South Africa, which was the largest market outside the European Union. We are pursuing the issue vigorously.

Fireworks

13. **Mr. Frank Roy** (Motherwell and Wishaw): What recent discussion he has had with fireworks manufacturers in relation to the sale of fireworks in the period up to 31 December. [100538]

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): Following discussions with my Department, the British Pyrotechnists Association agreed that it will advise retailers that fireworks should be displayed for sale only from 27 December. My hon. Friend has taken that on board and done a sterling job in his constituency. Many of his retailers did not know about the agreement. He brought 37 of them together and they have agreed to come on board and abide by the voluntary code. The House should applaud the work that he has done in his constituency.

Mr. Roy: I thank my right hon. Friend for his welcome words. Those retailers took on board what I had said in my letter and showed their social responsibility to the people of Motherwell and Wishaw, who have suffered from the misuse of fireworks. None of them knew about an agreement between the British Pyrotechnists Association and the Department of Trade and Industry. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that retailers who have already bought their stock of fireworks know about any future agreements?

Mr. Caborn: In the light of my hon. Friend's question and a debate that my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce responded to yesterday, I have been discussing the issue with departmental officials this morning. I intend to write this afternoon to the local authorities' co-ordinating bodies for trading standards, asking them to inform the Department of any breaches that they have had to deal with recently. I shall pass that on to the British Pyrotechnists Association to ensure that it is able to enforce its voluntary code with the retailers. I hope that there will be action today.

Post Office Network

14. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): What plans he has to safeguard the future of rural sub-post offices. [100540]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): The Government are fully committed to the maintenance of a nationwide network of post offices and will, for the first time, publish access criteria, which the new regulator will have a duty to monitor. The criteria will aim to ensure that everyone in the UK has reasonable access to post office counter services. The Government are making a substantial contribution to the costs of automating the counters network to strengthen its longer-term viability and the performance and innovation unit in the Cabinet Office is carrying out an urgent study on the Post Office network. Various rate relief schemes apply to many rural post offices.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Minister says that he is carrying out an urgent study. The Government have decided that all benefit claimants will have to have their benefits paid into a bank account by 2003. Given that 33 per cent. of the work of sub-post offices is related to the Benefits Agency and the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters estimates that 100 of my 201 sub-post offices are likely to close as a result of the measure, how will the Government reassure my sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses that their businesses are secure?

Mr. Johnson: Perhaps by avoiding the risible hyperbole that we hear from the Conservatives. In government, the Conservatives suggested that the way forward for the Post Office was to split the counters network from the rest of the network, even though it accounts for 40 per cent. of the work. The Conservatives now come forward as the defenders of rural post offices. We are not making the payment of benefits through automated credit transfer compulsory. We have said that the migration to ACT between 2003 and 2005 will happen along with the establishment of an automated counters network that will ensure that we can bring network banking back to rural areas.

The Conservatives have expressed concern about how benefits are paid. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), who is one of their Front-Bench spokesmen, had a novel solution to the problem. He was not so concerned about how benefits are paid. In a pamphlet for the no turning up group or the no turning back group or whatever it is, he said:

> "One Parent Benefit, Guardian's Allowance and Child's Special Allowance should be abolished".

One of the many damaging effects of that would be to reduce work over post office counters.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I thank the Minister for his support for a nationwide network of post offices, which stands in stark contrast to what happened under the previous Government. In my constituency, the post office in the village of Sheering has closed and has yet to be replaced. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in those circumstances, it is essential that the Post Office should

proactively seek an alternative provider, and make it clear that that provision can take place in many different venues and many different ways? Does not the Post Office need actively to promote that availability?

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend raises an important point. If he writes to me, I shall make sure that the Post Office looks into it. It has a good record of keeping postal services going in areas where it finds difficulty in recruiting sub-postmasters. I remind my hon. Friend that, for the first time, we will be putting into legislation access criteria that will ensure that people have reasonable access to the Post Office network, enforced by an independent regulator.

Beef Ban

12.31 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Resign.

Mr. Brown: The catcalls should come after the statement.

With permission, Madam Speaker, although there has been no change in this Government's policy on beef exports, in view of the statement made by the French Government last night I think it right to inform the House where matters now stand. Late last night, just after 11 pm in Paris, the French Prime Minister announced his Government's decision on how they intend to proceed in the light of the new advice from the French food safety agency, AFSSA, which they received on Monday 6 December.

The French statement said, in effect, that even though the risk is no more than hypothetical, the French Government are not ready to lift their ban now, but wish instead to press for further work on testing for BSE and on the labelling of British beef and beef products on the basis of European Union regulations, so that consumers can make an informed choice.

Her Majesty's Government are surprised and deeply disappointed that the French have chosen to take this position. It comes after many weeks of intensive talks, from which we received the impression that we had answered all the questions and met all the concerns from the French side. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister immediately spoke to the French Prime Minister, Mr. Jospin, last night, and said that he believed that the position that the French were taking up was totally wrong, flew in the face of science and was against the law. I wholly endorse that view.

I have spoken to the Commissioner, David Byrne, and called on him now to proceed immediately with the court action against the French. Mr. Byrne has confirmed that he will do so. He will ask next Tuesday's meeting of the full Commission to issue the legal opinion, which is the last step before the court case commences. Mr. Byrne has already stated publicly that he finds the French Government's refusal to lift the ban deeply disappointing. The Commission has worked as hard as we have to resolve this matter through rational discussion. Mr. Byrne sees no alternative now but court action.

Some are suggesting that we were wrong to think that we would make progress with the approach that we adopted when the problem first arose in October. I profoundly disagree. I have no doubt that we were right to engage in discussion, as we did. I believe, too, that through the clarification and assurances that we gave about how we are operating the date-based export scheme, we responded in full to the points that the French Government raised with us and gave them the basis they needed for lifting the ban.

I well understand the anger that British farmers feel at this impasse. It is a poor reward for the massive efforts that British beef farmers and traders have been making to rebuild the industry and to rebuild public confidence in their product. British beef is as safe as beef from anywhere else in Europe. That is not just my view: it is the unanimous view of the Commission's senior scientific advisers. I can understand the frustration felt more widely around the country.

The French action is astonishing. They have delivered a blow to the credibility of European Union law, but the French are on their own in taking this defiant approach. I assure the House that the Government are working by all means possible to ensure that the French Government honour their Community obligations and lift the ban.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I thank the Minister for his statement, which he made available to me about 20 minutes ago. Does he accept that last night's news is bad for Britain's beef farmers, bad for the European single market and bad for this Labour Government, whose handling of the issue from start to finish has been weak and incompetent? Will he admit that he should have asked the European Commission to start legal action much sooner after France imposed its illegal ban? Does he now accept that our advice that the legal process should run alongside continued political pressure was right from the start?

Does the Minister realise that by not even raising the beef issue at the Anglo-French summit two weeks ago, the Prime Minister kicked Britain's farmers in the teeth and let the French Government completely off the hook? Was not beef far and away the most important issue at that time between Britain and France? Does the Minister understand that each time the Government allow France to reopen issues that have been settled by the scientists, they are letting down British farmers and encouraging French intransigence? Will the Prime Minister now ensure that beef is at the top of the agenda at tomorrow's summit meeting in Helsinki? Does he realise that the very working of the single market could be damaged if the Heads of Government fail to address this urgent issue?

What help will the Government give British farmers who wish to seek compensation from France through the courts? Given that on 8 November the Prime Minister said that an official end to the ban could be delivered within days, will the Minister now tell us how many more days, weeks or months Britain will have to wait? Is it not the truth that after four months of conceding every French demand, however unreasonable, and of raising false hopes among British farmers time and again, the Government have made no progress towards solving this problem? How much longer must Britain tolerate the humiliating spectacle of our Prime Minister dancing like a puppet to Mr. Jospin's tune?

Does the Minister agree with the Prime Minister's statement in this House on 14 July, when he said that

"it is another example of new Labour working"?—[*Official Report*, 14 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 402.]

The time has come for the Minister to stop making excuses, to stop blaming other people for his Government's failures and to start standing up for Britain and Britain's farmers.

Mr. Brown: As the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) knows, I profoundly disagree with the approach that the Conservative party are adopting to this issue. The hon. Gentleman asked me whether I would accept his advice, and my answer to that is, "Not likely." I am very careful about where I take advice from, and I shall not

[Mr. Brown]

take it from the party which formed the Government who presided over the BSE crisis in the first place, who recommend that we start a trade war with the French, and who suggest that we should adapt the science—on the basis of no scientific evidence—so that we can ban French produce from entering this country. That is not the right way forward for our country.

The right way forward is to try to resolve the issue by dialogue if we can, and to protect our rights through the courts if we cannot. That is why we now look to the courts and to the Commission to stand our corner. Under a Labour Government, it is France which is isolated in Europe on this argument. It was not that long ago, under a Conservative Government, when it was the United Kingdom which was isolated in Europe.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Was not the intervention of the Opposition spokesman cheap, glib and disgraceful?

May I ask a factual question? I think that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said that the French attitude flew in the face of science. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister say whether we have seen in detail what the French scientists have said? Is it understood that many other industries are deeply worried about their trade with France? Sliding into a trade war with that country would hit the Scottish whisky industry terribly badly, to give just one example. That industry sells as much whisky in France as it does in Britain.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: France is the largest single market in the European Union for Scotch whisky. In fact, this country's exports of food and drink world wide are worth £10 billion every year. To embark on a trade war that would put some of that at risk would be absolute madness. This Government will not do that.

My hon. Friend is also absolutely right about the attitude of the official Opposition. They jeer from the sidelines but, if one listens carefully, one notices that they do not have a constructive alternative to offer.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Does not this outrageous decision by the French Government defy law, science and practical politics? Is it not a massive slap in the face for the Minister and the Government? Will the right hon. Gentleman pursue swift legal action in this matter, and does he agree that it would be extraordinary if France were to assume the EU presidency after it had been arraigned for blatantly ignoring European law?

The Prime Minister goes to Helsinki later today. Although it is not in Britain's interest to disrupt the business of the 13 countries that support Britain's position, and despite the synthetic smiles on display at the Anglo-French summit two weeks ago, will the Prime Minister make it clear that France can expect no diplomatic or political co-operation from Britain until this decision is reversed?

Finally, a full-scale trade war is in the interests of no one, least of all other British agricultural sectors. However, does the Minister agree that many British consumers will make their own decisions between now and Christmas, and that they will choose cheese from Somerset, not from France?

Mr. Brown: There is an excellent Somerset brie that I freely recommend to the House. All consumers can choose how to spend their money. That is perfectly reasonable in a free society. As to whether the French decision is a rebuff to me, I do not think that the entire French Cabinet have focused on me personally in this matter.

More generally, it is a mistake to personalise issues in that way. This is a difficult problem, which I have sought to resolve through mature dialogue with the Commission and with the French. We are going to keep on talking. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Of course we are going to keep talking. There are many issues on which we and the French share common cause and interests. It would be incredibly immature if we were to cut off all dialogue across a range of topics because we could not resolve this issue. As I have said over and over again, we should resolve the matter through dialogue if we can, and through the courts if we cannot. We have the law, science and the Commission on our side. We will win in court.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): We did not hear one word from the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) about testing, which is a new issue for the French. The reason is that, time and time again between 1991 and 1995, the Tory Government blocked requests for money to be given to British scientific institutions to test for BSE. We all know why those requests were blocked: no doubt the reason will emerge in the BSE inquiry next year.

In an article published on 13 October, *Le Figaro* exposed a trade in animals in the south-west of England that was supported by falsified documents. The trade was conducted not by farmers, but by agricultural traders, and was only uncovered thanks to the intervention of our police authorities. The report was read and circulated throughout France, and was also considered in the French Parliament. If people in the United Kingdom are breaking the law, is it not clear that major problems will be encountered in resolving this crisis?

Mr. Brown: On the second point, my Department has been unable to substantiate reports that any of those animals have been smuggled into France. However, people have been caught trying, and those breaking the law are prosecuted with the full rigour of the law.

My hon. Friend's point about testing is absolutely right. It behoves everybody with an interest in the matter to realise that this country has an enormous vested interest in testing.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): How does the Minister reconcile the French actions—and, incidentally, those of the German Länder, which are not importing British beef—with the Prime Minister's own words? The right hon. Gentleman has said:

> "Unlike the previous Government, we are working with our European partners who now listen to what we have to say."

Mr. Brown: The distinction is very clear, and I drew it to the attention of the House a few moments ago. Under

the previous Government, the United Kingdom was isolated within Europe. In this dispute, the French are isolated. We have the European Commission on our side. Thirteen member states have lifted the ban and the German Health Minister confirmed this morning that the German Government are proceeding to lift the ban.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): Is it not the height of hypocrisy for politicians who created the circumstances for BSE to crow about the awful consequences of that disease? Most of us believe that free and fair trade in the European Union is in the interests of all citizens of Europe. Will my right hon. Friend assure us that the European Commission and, indeed, the whole European Council, will do everything possible to restore that principle for all commodities?

Mr. Brown: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend's comments. Perhaps I could treat hon. Members to this quote:

"Faced with the temptation of unilateral action it is more than ever necessary to base our actions on multilateral rules that everyone abides by."

That was said by Lionel Jospin at the United Nations on 22 September 1999. I agree with him.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): We have a great deal of sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman, but the kindest thing that one could say about his performance today is that it was pathetic. How can he possibly justify being prepared to concede that British beef should be labelled as having been raised in Britain, while not thinking it appropriate that French meat, which has been raised on excrement, should be similarly labelled? How many scientists does the right hon. Gentleman need to tell him that such food might be unsafe?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is wrong—the European Union is currently considering beef labelling rules. The French have a labelling regime for domestic products. I notice that when the Leader of the Opposition called on a number of agricultural spokesmen to resign, the hon. Gentleman was the only one to do so.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): My right hon. Friend has reminded the House of the circumstances of the BSE crisis and its consequences. Could he also tell us whether the gunboat diplomacy that the Conservative party now seems to favour helped to resolve that issue? Is my right hon. Friend aware that the last thing the farmers in my constituency want is the sort of trade war proposed by the Conservative party?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. Farmers and farm leaders have made it absolutely clear to the Government that they do not want a trade war, least of all a trade war in agricultural products.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): No one is talking about a trade war, and it is absurd of the Government to pretend that we are. Will the Minister listen to Phillipe Roy, a restaurateur in my constituency, who has banned British beef and British products from his restaurant—[HON. MEMBERS: "British beef?"] I am sorry; I mean French beef and products. He has said publicly that he knows the French Government well—he used to work for them—and the only language that they understand is direct action. The Minister's cuddling up to the French plainly has not worked. Will he advocate some direct action?

Mr. Brown: No. Let me treat the House to a quote instead:

"Is that not common sense? Is it not time to introduce under article 36 a precautionary ban on French imports?"—[*Official Report*, 27 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 1010.]

Of course, that would be illegal, but it is what the Leader of the Opposition said.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the French Government's decision will be regarded with astonishment throughout Europe because it is wholly unjustified? Will he seek to ensure that legal procedures are expedited as quickly as possible, because the integrity of European Union decisions would otherwise be called into question? Will he confirm that had we followed the advice of the Conservative party and launched a trade war by banning French imports, we would have been acting illegally, would have lost the support of 13 of the other 14 European union nations and would have undermined the legal recourse that we may now pursue?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is not a bilateral dispute between the UK and France, but a dispute between the French and the rest of the EU. Legal action is being spearheaded by the Commission. I spoke this morning to Commissioner Byrne and urged him to move the action on as speedily as possible.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Since 8 November, when the Prime Minister said that the ban would be lifted within days, how many meetings has the Minister had with his French counterpart, and how many telephone conversations have they held?

Mr. Brown: I cannot treat the hon. Gentleman to the statistics that he asks for, but a substantial number of meetings has been held with the French and the Commission as we have tried to resolve the issue. The British Government have worked very hard to make dialogue work. Dialogue involving the French and the Commission resulted in a protocol that the French thought good enough to take back to their food standards agency. That agency then produced a further report for the French Government that could have provided a method by which the ban could be lifted. It is regrettable that that did not happen, but it was a political decision for the French Cabinet.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Does my right hon. Friend agree that a trade war with France would not help my farmers? Confidence in British beef is the key factor if our overseas market is to be restored, and playing politics with British beef will not help.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Farmers have said over and over that they do not want a damaging trade war of the kind advocated by the Leader of the Opposition. The domestic beef market is enormously important to beef farmers in the UK, and it

[Mr. Brown]

speaks volumes for public confidence in our thorough public protection measures that beef sales are now higher than they were when the BSE crisis first broke.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the Minister recognise that we seek not a trade war, but the rule of law? Does he realise that although we now have no option but to have recourse to law, and although the French action is both a crime and a mistake, what farmers want is a livelihood, not a court drama? Will the Minister ensure that he keeps talking to arrive at a settlement?

Mr. Brown: I shall keep talking to the French, although the right hon. Gentleman's parliamentary colleagues jeered at me when I said so earlier. I accept that he is sincere in what he says, but he must acknowledge that the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow agriculture spokesman advocate a trade war. They want the United Kingdom Government to break the law by illegally invoking article 36.

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): May I invite my right hon. Friend to recall the situation that he inherited when he took office, which was exemplified by the case of an eight-year-old boy in my constituency who lost his mother to new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease? May I encourage him to continue to press the scientific case—through legal means if necessary—with his European colleagues? Will he also continue to ignore the bombastic Barbour jacket diplomacy of the Conservatives?

Mr. Brown: Bombast and pompous rhetoric will not get us through this problem. BSE has been a national tragedy for our country. The cost to the Exchequer is enormous—£4.6 billion is the latest calculation. It has also been a tragedy for the victims of new variant CJD. My hon. Friend is right to point out the importance of our powerful public protection measures, which are the foundation of the case for the date-based export scheme.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will the right hon. Gentleman not realise that his softly, softly negotiating approach on the matter has been a disaster? Will he realise that when the French want a position they adopt the stance of de Gaulle and stand out and fight, irrespective of what the rest of Europe thinks about it? Hon. Members on both sides of the House are, hopefully, concerned for the farming community. What help will he and his Department give to farmers who are losing considerable sums of money because of the illegal continuation of the ban? How can they, rather like the Spanish fishermen, attempt to get some of the money back so that they can sustain a livelihood on the farm? What help will he and the Government give to assist farmers in that way?

Mr. Brown: Of course, we give a substantial amount of support and assistance to the beef sector, as the right hon. Gentleman knows—some domestically and some under the common agricultural policy. The right hon. Gentleman suggests that if, instead of negotiating reasonably, we behaved differently in the European Union, we would get a different outcome. I think that he is right. The previous Conservative Government behaved differently in Europe—they offended all our partners and launched a foolish beef war against the European Union and comprehensively lost it. Our partners view what we are doing in the European Union as different from the way in which the previous Government proceeded. That is why, in this dispute, they are all on our side.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Would my right hon. Friend agree that if we are to succeed in law, we must come with clean hands, we must remain on the high ground where we are now and we must avoid irresponsible and counterproductive populist gestures of the type suggested by the Opposition?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why I am rejecting the approach recommended by the official Opposition—of taking illegal measures against other countries, in particular the French. That is not the right way forward. It would turn this into a bilateral dispute between us and the French, instead of a dispute between them and the Commission, which is where we are at the moment.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): How right the Minister was to say that the catcalls should come after his statement. Does not this woeful saga in fact mark the collapse of the Government's entire European policy? Does it not demonstrate that, despite all the concessions that the Prime Minister has made on qualified majority voting and on joining new defence initiatives with the French, the fact remains that other European Union member states will pursue what they see as their national interests even if that is in breach of European law? When will the Government start to stand up for Britain's interests in Europe?

Mr. Brown: We are standing up for Britain's interests in Europe. The distinction between us and the previous Government is that we are doing it intelligently. The right hon. and learned Gentleman was a prominent member of the previous Government, who presided over the BSE crisis. I notice that in his contribution to the debate there was not a word of apology or regret from him.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is not some of the Opposition's sham anger today intended to obscure the fact that my right hon. Friend has tried to bring the problem to a speedy conclusion and has tried to use the procedures with vigour and firmness to get the earliest conclusion and to avoid resorting to law? Is that sham anger perhaps intended to hide the cost to this nation and to the farming and meat industries of the Opposition's failure? Should we not remind people of what that cost was?

Mr. Brown: The cost is a substantial £4.6 billion and 47 lives tragically lost so far, with potentially more to come. We have had not a word of sorrow or regret, or even an admission of blameworthiness, from the Opposition, who presided over all of this; yet they jeer from the sidelines as the Government try to clean up the mess that they left us.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): The Minister goes on about having proper dialogue with the French. Does he not realise that to have a proper face-to-face dialogue, he must change the position of the

British Government, because it is difficult to have dialogue if they are lying supine on the mat at the feet of the French Government? He must adopt a tougher negotiating position, having already given away all the aces and cards with which he had to play. Will the Minister answer this simple question? When did he last personally meet his French opposite number?

Mr. Brown: I spoke to my French counterpart on the telephone about an hour ago. The right hon. Gentleman says that we have made some tremendous concessions; there are no concessions—[HON. MEMBERS: "Meet?"] I shall meet my French counterpart next Tuesday at the Agriculture Council. The right hon. Gentleman suggests that we have made concessions on the date-based export scheme; no concessions have been made, nor, in all those discussions, were any new imposts imposed in the discussions.

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): I am appalled by the decision of the French Cabinet, but I salute my right hon. Friend on the statesmanship he has shown during the past months and on the way he has conducted himself, on behalf of the Government. Time and again, he has fought for British farmers. Does he agree that it is shameful of the Tory Opposition to criticise the Government? They would be unable to act differently. On 16 November, the shadow Minister of Agriculture appeared on GMTV. He said:

"We've always said that the right way to do this was to use the European Commission machinery."

He was right then; he is wrong now.

Mr. Brown: The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for South Suffolk, has adopted such a wide range of positions on the matter that he might, once or twice, get it right—probably by accident. Of course, the best way forward is to discuss these matters with our partners in the European Union—while always protecting our rights in law. That is exactly what we have done.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) and the Liberal spokesman, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), asked the Minister whether the issue was to be raised by the Prime Minister at Helsinki. In what terms will it be raised? Will the Minister give us a clear statement that the matter will be raised at the highest level, and that the Prime Minister will report back to the House on any progress that he has made?

Mr. Brown: I have already dealt with that question several times. We intend to pursue the matter through the courts.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on doing what the National Farmers Union, to whom the Opposition clearly do not listen, and the agricultural workers unions want—attempt to fast-track a settlement of the dispute. Like all reasonable and common sense thinking Members, I congratulate him on the work that he has done. Does he agree that if we were not full members of the EU—wholeheartedly so—we should now be unable to make the next move: to ensure that the French admit our beef under EU law?

Mr. Brown: The route through the courts is open to us because we are members of the EU. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that farmers' organisations and farm employees' organisations support the approach adopted by the Government; not one of them has endorsed the approach of the parliamentary Opposition.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): What further concrete measures does the Minister propose, or will he continue to wait and wait until the court decides the issue? Will he merely continue to talk and talk? If he does not take concrete action, will not the whole of Europe regard Britain as a soft touch?

Mr. Brown: I shall continue to discuss the matter with the French, if they want to do so. However, the formal discussions have reached their conclusion—the document accepted by the French as good enough to go before their food standards agency. That did not result in the French Cabinet's agreeing to lift the ban. They made a significant statement—that is why we must now look to the courts.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): I too congratulate my right hon. Friend on the way he has conducted the negotiations; it was not only constructive, but effective. He has defined and clarified the position—that would never have been achieved by the ranting of the Opposition. Having done that, will he find out from the Commission whether there is a fast-track way of obtaining a decision from the court—some form of summary judgment? His negotiations have now made it so clear that the French are wrong and we are right.

Mr. Brown: After my discussions this morning with Commissioner Byrne, it is clear that the Commission is looking at those aspects of handling the case now. Tuesday's meeting of the Commission is the last step before the court case commences, so we are getting on with this as quickly as we can. My hon. Friend is right to say that the way to deal with these matters is by explanation and rational dialogue—not, as the Opposition seem to suggest, by adopting a belligerent position and embarking on an unlawful trade war.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): The French action is utterly indefensible, but seemingly it will take 12—perhaps 18—months to get the French before the bar of the European Court. Is there not a glaring message here: that the whole procedure must be quickened up rapidly, because otherwise there is an incentive for states to act in a similar way? If the procedure were quickened up, that incentive would be removed and they would not be able to skew the market for so many months.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Those who do wrong should not benefit from it, and if justice is to come, it should come quickly. I made exactly that point to the Commissioner this morning.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): May I point out to my right hon. Friend that a trade war would inflict serious damage on the Scottish fishing industry? I remind him that when the Spanish trawler owners complained to the European Commission about the Tory Government's Merchant Shipping Act 1984, the Commission quickly hauled the Tory Government before the Court in Luxembourg. Those fishing interests in Spain

[Dr. Norman A. Godman]

are to receive substantial financial compensation. I hope that the same will hold for farmers throughout the United Kingdom.

Mr. Brown: Compensation is a matter for the Court. If one wants examples as to how not to handle such issues, there are plenty from the previous Government's stewardship of these issues, including the case that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Does not the present position prove that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) was right all along that we should have been engaging in dialogue but that at the same time, in July, we should have initiated legal procedures? Will the Minister give the House an assurance that the matter will be raised at Helsinki? If he will not, will he ask the Commission to take accelerated legal procedures in the European Court; and will he do two things in those procedures? First, will he press for compensation for British farmers; and secondly, will he ask for substantial fines if the French are proved to be acting illegally?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman may not be aware of this, but the legal action is already embarked upon. We have tried to resolve the matter by dialogue with the French. I have discussed accelerated action with Commissioner Byrne this morning. He is consulting his professional advisers on that point. It is obviously the United Kingdom Government's position that we want the matter to be before the courts as quickly as possible. The route that we have taken to resolve the matter now, given the disappointing—indeed, astonishing—decision of the French Cabinet, is to deal with it through the courts.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): The French decision is inexcusable, but does my right hon. Friend find nauseatingly distasteful the gloating glee with which some Tories greet every new sad consequence of the BSE disaster, for which they bear terrible responsibility, and which has cost billions of pounds and a tragic loss of life?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. It is not very pleasant to watch elected Members of the House taking a delight in a difficulty that has befallen an important national interest—the more so as it is a difficulty over which they presided in the first place.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Obviously, I share the horror at what the French Government have done. Will the Secretary of State, while pursuing legal action, ensure that the Prime Minister recognises that when, on Monday, he reports to the House on what has happened at the weekend, our farmers' morale will be greatly boosted if they can believe in his statement that he has made them a priority and not put them to one side for the sake of other negotiations?

Secondly, is there anything that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food or other offices of the Government can do to assist farmers in the legal action that would compensate them personally for any loss of exports?

Mr. Brown: I am not sure that it is open to my Department to underpin private legal actions, although I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. No one could have done more than my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to try to get this matter resolved by conducting dialogue with the French. Everyone in the Government has been working very hard on this. However—as I have repeatedly told the House—following the decision of the French Cabinet, although of course the dialogue between me, Jean Glavany and our respective Departments remains open, we now look to the courts for a resolution of the matter.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Did we not inherit a poisonous legacy from the Conservative party—salmonella, listeria, E.coli and, worst of all, the horrors of BSE—which led this Government to introduce a new Food Standards Agency? Because of the latest setback, is there not a powerful case for having Europe-wide legislation to establish a food standards agency that can police such matters across all 15 countries?

Mr. Brown: The Government are putting the interests of the consumer at the heart of food policy. We are setting up the independent Food Standards Agency, which will come into being on 1 April. The preliminary work between my Department and the Department of Health is already under way; the two Departments are working co-operatively. There are proposals in the European Union to try to draw the different threads together within the Union, including proposals for a European-wide agency. We shall of course examine such proposals with considerable interest.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): As Smithfield's Member of Parliament, I would like to know whether, in the light of where we have now got to, the Minister regrets any of the decisions that he has taken or methods that he has used in recent months?

Mr. Brown: We were absolutely right to embark upon the dialogue and the exchange of views with the Commission and with the French while ensuring that we did not allow any amendment to the date-based export scheme. We did not put any new imposts on United Kingdom farmers and we always preserved our rights in law.

Mr. Yeo: Will the Minister confirm that neither I nor any Opposition spokesman has advocated a general trade war? Does he not understand the difference between that, which would be the wrong response, and a perfectly legal ban—to protect the health of British consumers—on the import of contaminated French meat fed on human sewage and illegal material? Will the Prime Minister raise this issue at Helsinki tomorrow?

Mr. Brown: I have answered the question about Helsinki on a number of occasions. May I treat the hon. Gentleman to the following quote?

"This scandal demands a proportionate and targeted response—a precautionary ban on the import of potentially contaminated French meat until the French Government explain what they are doing to end those illegal practices".—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 1136.]

Such action would be illegal, and I have put the evidence on that in the Library in case anyone wants to dispute it. However, those remarks were made by the hon. Member for South Suffolk. He cannot even remember what he has said.

Business of the House

1.12 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 13 DECEMBER—Until 7 pm, debate on the Common Fisheries policy on a Government motion.

Motion on the Christmas recess Adjournment debate.

TUESDAY 14 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Terrorism Bill.

WEDNESDAY 15 DECEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the Representation of the People Bill [1st Day].

THURSDAY 16 DECEMBER—Estimates Day [1st Allotted Day].

There will be a debate on aviation safety. Followed by a debate on inward and outward investment in Scotland.

At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

Proceedings on the Consolidated Fund Bill.

FRIDAY 17 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

I will give the House the provisional business for the following week, but it comes with more than the usual health warning. In the immediate run-up to Christmas and in the immediate aftermath, hon. Members will always try to fit in debates on certain issues. At present, we anticipate the business to be as follows:

MONDAY 20 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Transport Bill.

TUESDAY 21 DECEMBER—Debate on public expenditure.

The House may also be asked to consider any Lords messages which may be received.

Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

[Thursday 9 December 1999: Relevant documents: Class III, Vote 6: Environment, Transport and the Regions: Transport Industries, in so far as they relate to aviation safety. (14th Report of the Environment, Transport and the Regional Affairs Committee, HC-275 (1998-99).

Class XIII, Vote 1: Scotland and transfers to the Scottish Consolidated Fund, in so far as they relate to inward and outward investment in Scotland.

Monday 13 December: Floor of the House—European Union document: unnumbered EM submitted by MAFF dated 5 December 1999. Fisheries: Total Allowable Catches and Quotas for 2000. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee Report: HC 23-iii, (1999–2000).]

Sir George Young: I am grateful to the Leader of the House for giving us next week's business and an indication of the likely business for the following week. I welcome the proposed debate in Government time on public expenditure, which comes after the great pressure exerted by Conservative Members at business questions. Will the right hon. Lady consider whether the House might, for the convenience of Members and staff, sit earlier than normal on the last day before it rises for the recess? Will the right hon. Lady confirm that there will be a statement on Monday from the Prime Minister, following the Helsinki summit, when the House will want to hold the Government to account on protecting British interests in Europe?

I understand that the much delayed defence White Paper will be published next week. Can the right hon. Lady confirm that, and tell us that the Secretary of State for Defence will present it in an oral statement? I understand that the Defence Committee will then conduct a swift inquiry, which is likely to be completed by the middle of January. Can we have the postponed two-day defence debate immediately thereafter, in view of increasing concern about procurement issues, overstretch and the European army?

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has announced a self-imposed deadline of next Wednesday on the plans for Wembley—either the plans are revised or the lottery money is forfeited. Will the right hon. Gentleman make a statement to the House when the deadline expires?

The former small business Minister promised an annual debate on small businesses. What has happened to that promise?

Finally, for those Members who like to plan ahead, can the right hon. Lady shed any light on the timing of the February constituency week?

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his slightly grudging welcome for the debate on public expenditure, which we hope to schedule for the week after next. His suggestion that we should change the hours of sitting on the final day before the recess is interesting, and I shall certainly have it discussed and return to the House with information about that.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me if I anticipate that the Prime Minister will make a statement after the Helsinki summit, and indeed I do anticipate such a statement, as is the norm after a European Council.

I cannot immediately confirm that I expect the defence White Paper to be published next week, although obviously we hope that it will be published in the not too distant future. I can certainly confirm that it will go to the Defence Committee. It is, of course, a matter for the Committee how speedily it deals with the White Paper, although I am sure that its members will want to deal with it as quickly as possible. I shall certainly keep under consideration the right hon. Gentleman's request for an oral statement, because of the delay. I can assure him that there will be a defence debate and that we will want to schedule it as early as we reasonably can, although of course I cannot, at the moment, give a clear indication of how early that will be.

On the expiry of the Wembley deadline, I shall draw the right hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and give consideration to the right hon. Gentleman's proposal, but whether there is merit in making a statement when the deadline has expired depends a little on what has happened by then.

I am aware of the undertaking to have regular debates on small and medium-sized enterprises, but I am not sure that I recall the wording that the right hon. Gentleman quoted. The Government will try to find time for such a debate, but he will know that before a recess timing is under great pressure.

[Mrs. Beckett]

I cannot, I fear, give the right hon. Gentleman any steer about a February half-term, although I shall certainly bear in mind his wish to have one.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): May we have a statement next week about the dangerous and deteriorating situation in Montenegro? The Leader of the House will have heard that last night the Serbs occupied the international airport, which is the link to the world for the democratic Government and people of Montenegro that enables them to keep their distance from Milosevic's regime. I hope that my right hon. Friend and the Foreign Secretary will consider it important not only to keep the House informed about events but to signal to the regime in Belgrade that we will not stand idly by and watch the democratic Government of Montenegro perish.

Mrs. Beckett: A number of people are concerned about the reports that appeared yesterday. My hon. Friend said that the situation in Montenegro is dangerous and deteriorating, but I understand—I know that my hon. Friend will welcome this—that that is not the case. The airport has reopened to normal civilian traffic, and it appears that there was more of a misunderstanding than a deliberately engineered difficulty, and that that misunderstanding has been resolved. I can certainly assure my hon. Friend that the Government will continue to keep the situation under review because we are anxious that Montenegro should continue to prosper.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the Leader of the House look more carefully at the opportunities that the House may have to follow up the issues raised at the Helsinki summit? She was present for much of the discussion just now when her right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food made a statement and she will be well aware that the issues raised by the continued French ban on British beef go much wider even than agriculture; they raise questions about the whole decision-making process in the European Union and the integrity that member states believe it to have.

The right hon. Lady will recognise that the French Government are attempting to emulate the pick-and-mix attitude to EU agreements shown by some elements of the Conservative party. Such an approach could spread to other countries. Does she accept that the issues relate to qualified majority voting and the veto? Indeed, had the latter been applicable in the summer, the French could have vetoed the lifting of the ban on our beef exports.

Will the right hon. Lady take account of the extremely important issue of reform of European institutions and the way in which the European Court operates—important implications of which Members on both sides of the House have just recognised? A mere statement by the Prime Minister on Monday, and then a very short discussion, is not sufficient to deal with such extremely important structural issues.

The debate allocated for the Tuesday before we rise for the Christmas recess is not time-sensitive. May I suggest that that would be an appropriate day on which to discuss the extensive implications of the French decision for agriculture, our exports and the decision-making processes of the EU?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not dismiss the importance of the hon. Gentleman's points, but, unfortunately, it is by no means the first time that one country or another, including this country under the previous Government's maladministration, has found itself falling foul of the way in which European law works.

Although these are of course grave and serious matters, and the Government will so deal with them, I am afraid that they are not unprecedented. I certainly do not see a case for sweeping away all other items that the House may wish to discuss in order to concentrate on that item at this particular time. Obviously, the matter will come up—perhaps in the aftermath of the statement on the Helsinki Council and, no doubt, on other occasions. However, with respect to the hon. Gentleman, I am afraid that the issue does not require our urgent consideration in quite the way that he suggests.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Has my right hon. Friend's attention been drawn to early-day motion 100, which has been signed by me and 115 other Members?

[*That this House wishes to register its deep appreciation and gratitude to the doorkeepers and police who serve in the House of Commons and whose help and guidance have been of incalculable assistance to generations of members of the public; welcomes the introduction of modern communications technology, including telephones, computers, pagers and faxes which now make it possible for information to pass more quickly and efficiently but does not share the view that these techniques have, in any way, diminished the need for those staff who have always had responsibilities that go much wider; regrets the recent decisions that have been taken to reduce the staffing of doorkeepers and police in the Palace, thus preventing them from providing the best possible service, for which they have been recently, and expensively, trained; and invites the Serjeant at Arms to reconsider his decision, so as to take account of the importance these members of the staff play in the life and work of this place.*]

It has given Members an opportunity to express their gratitude to the doorkeepers and police, who are essential to Members' work and to the public who come here. The motion expresses anxiety that the use of pagers and modern communications may render many of those doorkeepers and police unnecessary. Will my right hon. Friend discuss that with the Serjeant at Arms to see whether some arrangement can be reached that will safeguard the jobs of those people, who really make this place work?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not think that there is an hon. Member who does not share my right hon. Friend's appreciation of and gratitude to the doorkeepers, police and related staff who provide the services on which we all depend and who do so much to smooth the path of Members, particularly when they are new and relatively inexperienced. I am sure that everyone shares my right hon. Friend's concern, too.

It is a matter of continued agreement between the Serjeant at Arms, the Speaker and all who are engaged in the management of the House that we truly value, and show that we value, our staff. In that sense, my right hon. Friend is seeking a continuation of our normal concerns. Without recalling precisely the rest of the text of the

motion, I think that he would be the first to say that the House must use modern and efficient methods, as well as recognise the value and service of individuals.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The right hon. Lady's answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) shows that the Government have betrayed the interests of small business. In the run-up to the election, the Labour party made a specific manifesto commitment to hold an annual debate on small business. So far, in two and a half years, there has been one such debate, and that was in 1998. The Government have obviously broken their promise for 1999. Is not it about time that they admitted just that?

May we have a debate on early-day motion 141?

[*That this House notes that no representatives of the Liberal Democrat Party have played any role in the proceedings on the Financial Services and Markets Bill since 26th October and that their attendance before then had been at best 'patchy'; further notes that the role of the honourable Member for Twickenham as the representative of the Liberal Democrat Party from this House on the Pre-Scrutiny Burns Committee on the Bill was virtually non-existent; and is concerned that the Liberal Democrat Party is not taking seriously, or contributing to, the scrutiny of this important and complex piece of legislation which will have an enormous influence on the whole financial services industry in the United Kingdom.*]

It reveals the pressure on the Liberal Democrats as a result of their involvement in government, which leaves them unable to attend Standing Committees that are considering important legislation.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman's suggestion is utterly ridiculous. We made a commitment to small businesses. The Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), who first became the small business Minister, was gratified to hear people in the small business associations saying that she was the most successful and helpful small business Minister whom they could recall.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is that why she was sacked?

Mrs. Beckett: She has now been replaced by someone who is equally assiduous in her interest.

Mr. Bercow: So she was sacked.

Mrs. Beckett: She was promoted, not sacked. The notion that we have in some way betrayed the interests of small business—on account of a commitment that the Conservative party never even thought of giving—is ludicrous.

As for the role played by the Liberal Democrats, may I remind the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) that it was his party that first sought to debate their role in the House, then changed its mind in the hope of scoring a triumph in the transport debate, which expectation was singularly disappointed? Secondly, may I say—without, I hope, causing too much disarray on the Liberal Democrat Benches—that for many years it has been my experience that they are not always the most assiduous attenders at Committee, irrespective of what else is happening?

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): My right hon. Friend may be aware that I asked the Prime Minister yesterday for an inquiry into the insertion of a listening device in the car of the president of Sinn Fein during the peace process. Will she prevail upon her colleague, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to make a statement about whether an inquiry will be pursued, in the light of the call for that inquiry by both the Irish Taoiseach and the Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly? That statement should contain a response to questions about which Minister authorised the bugging device to be inserted; if a Minister did not authorise a device, who did; and what factors were taken into account in the decision, either by a Minister or by an official, particularly in view of the danger to the peace process at that delicate stage.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I shall have to disappoint my hon. Friend. I did hear his question to the Prime Minister yesterday and I am aware that the Prime Minister said that he did not comment on such security matters. That is the consistent approach of the Government, so I fear that I cannot satisfy my hon. Friend's request.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Right hon. and hon. Members who were present for the statement by the Agriculture Minister on beef exports to France heard the right hon. Gentleman imply that there had been 47 deaths as a result of BSE. That is a serious and significant comment by the Agriculture Minister. To my knowledge, there has been no proof of any connection between death caused by CJD, and BSE in beef. If the Minister made that comment in the light of some knowledge that he has, does the Leader of the House consider it appropriate that he should come back to the House to clear up this important matter? For a Minister of the Crown to imply that 47 humans have lost their lives as a result of BSE, when there is no evidence of that, is extremely serious. If, however, the Minister has evidence to prove that, the House should be told about it, because of the enormous significance of that in the context of all that has gone on in the beef industry over the past several years.

Mrs. Beckett: I heard almost all of my right hon. Friend's statement and his replies to questions. I do not recall the precise wording to which the hon. Gentleman referred, and, therefore, I cannot confirm his interpretation. All those issues are being actively considered in the BSE inquiry. Although it may not have been the hon. Gentleman's intention, any attempt by Conservative Members to pretend that the Government are at fault on BSE is not only terrible but doomed to failure.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I wonder whether the Leader of the House has had time to read early-day motion 164?

[*That this House notes the success of the national minimum wage in helping lift people out of poverty; further notes under this Government jobs have been created; however notes that the rate of the national minimum wage was set in July 1998; and believes it is now time to substantially raise this rate.*]

[Mrs. Alice Mahon]

It points out that the minimum wage rate was set in July 1998. Will there be a statement before the recess to announce an increase? May I make a modest suggestion of a £1.40 an hour increase, which would bring the minimum wage to only £5?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not aware of the likelihood of any statement on the level of the national minimum wage in the near future. My hon. Friend knows that when the original rate was set, the timing of its introduction was taken into account. The Government receive advice on the matter from the Low Pay Commission, which will doubtless consider those issues in due course.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Will the Leader of the House make a statement at an early date on the Government's policy on pre-legislative scrutiny? The Government advise us that they are committed to such scrutiny, and they gave an assurance that the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, which was debated on Monday, would be published in draft form. However, they failed the Treasury Committee, the Procedure Committee and the Public Accounts Committee by not publishing the Bill in draft form, and refused my request, as Chairman of the Procedure Committee, to make it subject to a Special Standing Committee. Will the Leader of the House explain the Government's position? They appear to support pre-legislative scrutiny, but fail to take an ideal opportunity to effect that process?

Secondly, will the right hon. Lady explain the reasons for the business of the next 10 days? Next Thursday, there is a one-line Whip on a subject that is of interest to some hon. Members, and the House is not sitting on Friday. Yet, in Christmas week, the House is returning for what could be two three-line Whip days. Would not it have been better to have scheduled the whipped business for the week prior to Christmas so that only a limited number of hon. Members needed to return to the House in Christmas week? That would have been more family friendly.

Mrs. Beckett: I am almost silenced by hearing the hon. Gentleman allow the words family friendly to cross his lips, although I am aware of his devotion to his charming family. I do not claim that he is one of the culprits, but he knows that Conservatives Members often complain that the House does not have sufficient significant business prior to a recess. Indeed, some idiot always complains about the length of the recess, even when it is of normal length, or shorter than on previous occasions. However, I acquit the hon. Gentleman of that complaint.

The hon. Gentleman made an important point about pre-legislative scrutiny. The Government are committed to it and fully recognise its worth. We would like as much legislation as is practicable to be published in draft. However, the hon. Gentleman will understand that we can achieve that only over time, because of the sheer scale of the resources required to complete advance drafting and drafting of legislation.

The hon. Gentleman implied that a commitment had been made to produce the Government Resources and Accounts Bill in draft for pre-legislative scrutiny. That was not possible because, as the hon. Gentleman knows, so much work was going on to take account of a substantial amount of pre-legislative discussion and debate. I acknowledge that that is not entirely the same as holding discussions on a draft Bill, but the hon. Gentleman knows that, for at least a year, extensive discussions have taken place between Select Committees, the Comptroller and Auditor General, and various expert commentators.

The hon. Gentleman raised the possibility of convening a Special Standing Committee, but I am not entirely convinced that that would be the right procedure for the legislation. I can assure him, however, that we are looking carefully at how to handle it in order to ensure that we provide adequate time for the depth of scrutiny that we know many Members on both sides of the House want and which the Government do not want to resist.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): The Leader of the House will know that today is the last day on which Raleigh Cycles in my constituency will be a mass producer of bicycle frames in the United Kingdom. I am sure that she shares my sadness that a variety of modern high-tech laser equipment that has been used to produce bikes at Raleigh will go under the auctioneer's hammer tomorrow. It will almost certainly be sold to its competitors from China and Taiwan, none of which have to meet the environmental, health and safety or labour standards that Raleigh has rightly set for production in the UK. Can we have a statement or a debate in the House about UK policy on manufacturing industry, particularly the bicycle manufacturing industry, with a view to defining a framework for provision in the 21st century that will not consign UK manufacturing to being little more than an offshore screwdriver assembly plant?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend will know how thoroughly and for how long I have shared his concern for manufacturing industry and, in common with Members on both sides of the House, I recognise its importance. Equally, however, although I have great sympathy for the company and his constituents employed at Raleigh, he will know that, unfortunately, it is not always possible for all individual enterprises or manufacturing sectors to continue in business. It is vital that the Government work in partnership with the private sector to identify those areas of manufacturing in which Britain can continue to be competitive and not only maintain a competitive edge, but perhaps develop industry for the future. He will also know that that is part of the purpose of the Government's industrial policy.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): May I wish the right hon. Lady a speedy recovery from the sore throat with which she is evidently suffering? May I also remind her that this time last week she said that she would speak to the Government Chief Whip about the incident in which a junior Government Whip threatened my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) with violence in the Chamber? Has she spoken to the Government Chief Whip about that? If so, what action will the Government Chief Whip take and when will my hon. Friend receive her reply to his formal letter of complaint about that disgraceful episode?

Mrs. Beckett: Last week, I expressed dismay that there are times when relationships between individual Members

of the House break down. I was not aware of the incident to which the hon. Gentleman referred. I made some inquiries and my understanding is that it was unfortunate that there was some disagreement, but my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip has dealt with it through the usual channels. It is also my understanding that both sides now consider the matter closed.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on leasehold reform? Several of my constituents who live in blocks of flats—Wycliffe gardens in Shipley and Myrtle court in Bingley—have been under threat of a charge being levied for new windows in those blocks. The problem is all the more difficult because they have already paid for their individual windows. If we have such a debate, might I be able to urge Bradford city council to obtain new legal advice so that it can waive those charges?

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend has been campaigning extensively on behalf of his constituents who could face that difficulty, and I sympathise with the concerns that he expresses, but I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate in the Chamber. He will know, however, that the Government have recently doubled the opportunities for Members to raise matters on the Adjournment and I have little doubt that he will seek to use that opportunity to raise the matter further.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Can the Leader of the House arrange for an early statement on the influx of asylum seekers into this country? I understand that the number may be as high as 60,000 this year, which represents a cost of hundreds of millions of pounds. I also understand that there is a problem with a large number of them coming in through Calais and that our officers are not being allowed to look at those immigrants' papers because the French authorities will not allow it. It seems that, although they will not take our exports, we are expected to take theirs.

Mrs. Beckett: If the hon. Gentleman was present for the previous statement on beef, he will be perfectly well aware that there is extensive trade traffic between France and the UK and that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said that the value of British goods exported to France in agricultural trade alone is significant.

The hon. Gentleman has raised a different and serious point about asylum seekers, however, and I can tell him that I am aware that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and his officials have been discussing that matter. They are attempting to act with efficacy to ensure that we give refuge to real asylum seekers who are at risk, but dissuade entry by those who are not at any risk and simply wish to settle in this country.

I hope that it is within the hon. Gentleman's recollection that it is not so long since, if I recall correctly, his party, and no doubt he with it, voted against Government proposals that were designed to achieve precisely the effect that I have described. No doubt that was done for short-term opportunism which, sadly, is true of the Conservative party on so many occasions.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Has my right hon. Friend had the opportunity to study this week's primary school league tables? If so, has she observed the outstanding performance of schools in my constituency and throughout the local education authority of Bury, including schools in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis)?

Although we celebrate yet again the astonishing performance of primary schools in Bury—this year we mark a 10 per cent. improvement on last year's score—we are very conscious that the league tables as they are now constructed do not tell the whole story. They take no account of the social background of the children whose scores are being measured. We are confident that if we moved to a value-added system of league tables, schools in Bury would perform even better than at present.

Will my right hon. Friend discuss with colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment the urgent need to introduce a value-added system into league tables? Will she find time in the Government's programme to have a full and frank debate about the different methodologies of value added that are currently under debate?

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware of the extremely encouraging results from the primary sector throughout the United Kingdom. I am happy to congratulate all involved in Bury, particularly the teachers who will have contributed so much to the outstanding results in my hon. Friend's constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis).

I am aware also of the great technical interest in precisely how the league tables are drawn up. While I acquit my hon. Friend of special pleading, since he is saying that he thinks that his constituency would show up even higher in the league tables if there were a different way of measuring performance, the debate that he seeks is not one that I am likely to be able to find time for in the Chamber in the near future. However, perhaps it is exactly the sort of subject—one of genuine interest but not one involving immediate party political controversy—that might be suitable for a bid for a debate in Westminster Hall.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Could we not have two days to debate the Transport Bill on Second Reading? Is it not the case that it is a pantechnicon measure, a great big Bill into which two and a half years' worth of unfulfilled Labour manifesto promises have been chucked? Would it not be more appropriate that those disparate but crucial measures be debated over a reasonable time, because issues such as road user charges, workplace parking taxes and, above all, the proposed privatisation of National Air Traffic Services are of crucial significance? Is it not true that the Government are trying to prevent Labour Members from having adequate time to debate those issues, which are so controversial and so bitterly resisted, even by Labour Members.?

Mrs. Beckett: There is no validity in that accusation. The hon. Gentleman calls for a two-day debate, and I undertook to recognise that that call had been made and to consider the matter, but without commitment. He will be aware that a major part of the Bill, that which relates to the Strategic Rail Authority, has in effect already had a day's debate because that matter was discussed separately

[Mrs. Beckett]

towards the end of the previous Session. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government will provide time to debate the Transport Bill.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Will the Leader of the House consider making time for an urgent debate on the deep-mine coal industry? Five pits have been lost in the past year and two more are under threat, the main one being Ellington in the north-east, which is the last pit in that region. There have been such debates in the past—I think that two one-and-a-half-hour Adjournment debates have taken place since the election, the last initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham). In that debate, many hon. Members were not called. Many hon. Members think that it is a national issue. I do not have any coal mines in my constituency—it has never contained one—but it is an issue of national importance. If we continue to leave the coal industry to free market forces, without any shadow of a doubt, within about 10 years, the last pit in England will probably have closed.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand and sympathise with my hon. Friend's concern. The Government have explicitly recognised the need for diverse sources of energy supply. I understand his point that leaving everything to the free working of the market may not always be to the coal industry's advantage, but, as he will know, that is a major improvement on the position that we inherited from the previous Government: the market was rigged to work against coal. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate in the near future, but he, like others, might like to consider whether there is scope to exploit the opportunity that is presented by Westminster Hall.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): I was glad to note that the Leader of the House had been able to witness most of the statement by the Minister of Agriculture. She can be in no doubt, as I have been in no doubt from telephone calls and faxes from my farming constituents this morning, of the deep anger—not sham anger—that is felt by them as a result of French inaction on the ban.

One of the main points at issue seems to be whether the legal options that are open to the House might incite a trade dispute. Many of us believe that, if we want to deal with France, we should deal with the legal aspect and the negotiations in parallel. Will the Leader of the House make time available for the legal officers of the Government to make a statement in the House to give an opportunity for questions, so that all the legal options are discussed, including injunctive relief?

Mrs. Beckett: I will certainly draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of my relevant right hon. and hon. Friends, but my understanding of the matter is that it is a European Commission case that is being taken against France. That is to Britain's advantage as it makes the point that France is isolated in its action. It is important that that remain firmly on the record. I will draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends, but I am not promising a statement of the type that he seeks.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): May I echo the sentiments of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) about the situation in Montenegro? Last week, with the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), I visited Montenegro under the auspices of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Not only I, but the people whom we visited and met, including members of the opposition parties from Serbia, were disappointed that no Labour Member was apparently available to accompany us. The position is potentially explosive and dangerous. Would it not be better to have a debate now than to have to rely on one when things have got worse?

Mrs. Beckett: I will draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. The hon. Gentleman will know that Foreign Office questions may be tabled in a few days, but I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on that matter before Christmas. However, I take seriously his observations because he was in Montenegro so recently, and I will draw them to the attention of my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): May I urge the right hon. Lady—for once, quite genuinely—to hold a debate next week to consider the decision of the intervention board to remove the only remaining slaughterhouse in Devon from the over-30-months scheme? Does she appreciate that Devon has some of the most densely populated cow country in the land? The decision will mean that cows making their final journey, many having never left their home farm, will have to travel up to 116 miles for more than three and a half hours.

I do not say that that is yet the Government's fault—clearly, it is not—but the final decision remains with Government. Whatever may disunite us, whatever exchanges we have had on these occasions before, animal welfare—it is an animal welfare issue—cuts across the party divide. If she can see any time at all next week for a short debate, it really is something that she might want to accede to.

Mrs. Beckett: I know that the hon. Gentleman will understand that, given the closeness of the Christmas recess, I fear that I am unable to say now that I shall be able to find time for such a debate. I was, however, touched by his frankness in saying that his request was, for once, quite genuine—and I shall remind him of that on another occasion. I shall certainly draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture. He is entirely right to say that animal welfare concerns are shared on both sides of the House.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Has the right hon. Lady seen this morning's edition of *The Independent*, in which the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) is reported as saying that the Prime Minister is behaving like a madman? However, under the procedures established in section 141 of the Mental Health Act 1983, only you—as you will know, Madam Speaker—are able to determine whether an hon. Member is sane or insane. Nevertheless, the right hon. Lady might think that she could assist you, Madam Speaker, by enabling the Prime Minister to make a statement about that early next week to the House. With the greatest

respect, it is very difficult to judge the matter only at Prime Minister's Question Time, as there are so many interventions by other excitable Labour Members.

Mrs. Beckett: I am not familiar with the report to which the hon. Gentleman alludes, although I am familiar with the varied and colourful phraseology frequently adopted by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn). I shall only say, first, that the Prime Minister will be in the House on Monday, in the aftermath of the Helsinki summit; and, secondly, that my right hon. Friend's sanity and effectiveness are not doubted anywhere, except perhaps on the Opposition Benches.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I join my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) in wishing the Leader of the House a speedy recovery from her malady.

May we, please, have an early debate in Government time on the proposal unveiled by Lord Falconer, in the other place—in a written answer, and reported in today's edition of *The Daily Telegraph*—that new Ministers should be sent on induction courses to learn how to run the Whitehall machine?

Does the right hon. Lady accept that, although the Government's performance—or underperformance—since 1 May 1997 demonstrates that the need for such courses is extremely pressing, it would be helpful if we could have such a debate, as it would allow Ministers to tell the House exactly how many Ministers have been invited to attend such courses, from which Departments they hail, the Ministers' identity, and which recalcitrant Ministers refused the invitation. Does she also agree that, in the interests of cross-party co-operation on this important matter, there should be an opportunity for Opposition Members to recommend suitable candidates who are most likely to benefit from the induction courses available?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful both to the hon. Gentleman and to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) for their kind remarks. It is most touching—in fact, it is almost suspicious.

I do not think that anyone in the United Kingdom, except perhaps some Opposition Members, will think that the Government's performance, compared with that of the previous Government, demonstrates any pressing need for special training for Ministers. However—I thought that this was common ground in the House—there must always be merit in better training being available for people in all walks of life. The hon. Gentleman will know that induction courses for new Members of Parliament have been introduced, and that many Members have benefited from them.

The hon. Gentleman walked straight into my final remark on the matter. He suggested—after yesterday's debate, I do not know how he has the nerve to do it—that Opposition Front Benchers should be invited to identify Ministers who could benefit from such courses, but we could all identify plenty of Conservative Members who could benefit from an induction course on how to be a decent Opposition.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): In the interests of the throat of the Leader of the House, my question may be answered with a simple yes.

Yesterday, Madam Speaker, you kindly granted an Adjournment debate to my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), entitled "European Legislation (Parliamentary Scrutiny)". Although we had a most interesting debate, there were three problems.

First, very few hon. Members turned up for the debate, because it was held in the alien and lifeless atmosphere of the luvvie-zone of Westminster Hall. Secondly, and more importantly, the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee and all its members except for the Conservatives were visiting Brussels on Scrutiny Committee business. Thirdly, the Minister did not have enough time to answer the important questions that were raised. Those questions relate to the nature of the government of this country, as we face a deluge of regulation and legislation that is not properly scrutinised by our current arrangements. Could we have a full debate on the Floor of the House in the new year?

Mrs. Beckett: Having listened to the hon. Gentleman, I am not sure what that debate is supposed to be about. He seems to dislike the architecture of the Grand Committee Room in Westminster Hall. If yesterday's debate took place in the absence of many members of the European Scrutiny Committee it is not surprising that it was not as well attended as one would wish, although that is by no means unusual for Adjournment debates. However, I agree that the situation was unfortunate. As arrangements for debates in Westminster Hall settle down, we hope to avoid that problem. We go with the recommendations of the Liaison Committee on what Select Committee reports to debate, to ensure that Members who have a particular interest are not disadvantaged. I am sorry to hear that those arrangements might have broken down yesterday. We shall certainly bear that in mind. Whether the Minister had enough time to take part depended on the length of the contributions of the others who spoke.

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman spoke for 24 minutes.

Mrs. Beckett: A terrible allegation is being made that the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) spoke for 24 minutes. That suggests that he was enjoying what he describes as the alien and lifeless atmosphere of Westminster Hall, about which I fear that I cannot undertake to do anything.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): May I also wish the right hon. Lady a speedy recovery? I do not want to contradict her commendations of the new Grand Committee Room in Westminster Hall. Will she acknowledge that Monday night will afford right hon. and hon. Members a proper opportunity to raise many subjects in the debate on the Christmas Adjournment?

Will she clarify her answer on the important subject of small businesses? On 19 June last year, the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), who was then the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry, gave the House a clear undertaking, saying that the debate on that day

"fulfils a commitment that the Government gave while in opposition, when we said that we would institute an annual parliamentary debate about the small business sector".—[*Official Report*, 19 June 1998; Vol. 314, c. 606.]

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

I was inclined to infer that the Leader of the House was abandoning that commitment. Could we have an assurance that she will not abandon it and that there will be an annual debate on small businesses?

Mrs. Beckett: My answer is a mixture of yes and no. Of course we recognise the importance of having a debate on small and medium-sized businesses. I was not abrogating any undertaking. The fact that someone referred to what they described as an annual debate is not the same as saying that the Government have a commitment to one, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that I have taken the request for such a debate on board seriously. We shall endeavour to find time for it, but I cannot at the moment say when that might be.

Point of Order

1.58 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. We have heard yesterday and today in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) the long-standing view that the Government do not discuss security issues. I accept that. However, I am dismayed and I wonder whether you, together with the Clerk and the Serjeant at Arms, could consider the wider parliamentary issues raised by the reported bugging of the car of the hon. Member for Belfast, West (Mr. Adams), which go to the heart of our ancient rights and liberties in the House. With the growth of electronic surveillance, all 659 of us are vulnerable to such trespassing on our rights. The House should consider the issue and discuss whether matters have moved on. The use of such devices on hon. Members would be an infringement of our rights and the immunities and privileges of the House.

Madam Speaker: That is not a point of order for me. I remind the hon. Gentleman, first, that I am not prepared to discuss security matters across the Floor of the House, and secondly, that cars in Belfast are not a matter of parliamentary business.

Peter Nevile Wake Jennings Esq, CVO

2 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I beg to move,

That this House expresses its appreciation of Peter Nevile Wake Jennings Esq, CVO for his 47 years distinguished public service, including four years as Serjeant at Arms, and extends to him its best wishes for his retirement.

Hon. Members will see that this is a motion in the name of Members from both sides of the House, and it is right and proper that that should be so. Members of all parties are joining together to thank Peter Jennings for his long and distinguished service to this House.

Peter Jennings' career in public service is quite neatly divided. He spent 24 years in the Royal Marines, and 23 in the service of the House. I am not entirely sure how much life has changed in the Royal Marines since 1952—probably rather less than life in the House of Commons has changed since he joined us in 1976, a few years before most Members present for the debate today will have been elected.

When Peter Jennings came to work here, Members operated—usually not from choice—from areas such as the Cloisters. Hon. Members who had offices of their own were a select breed, as were those who were lucky enough to share an office. I myself was fortunate, as a new Member, to share one with a distinguished colleague who is now the Government's Chief Whip.

There have been vast improvements in the House's accommodation over the years and perhaps the culmination of those improvements, Portcullis house, is now near completion. Many in the House's service will have had a hand in that project, but the Serjeant does and should feel a proper pride that the development was built on his watch, so to speak, and particularly that it is now expected to come in on time and under budget. It is very much a memento of his service that as we come to the end of the 20th century, the House at last has been provided with a building fit for the modern age.

The House will know also that Peter Jennings has been the force behind the achievement of a smaller building project—again at the direction of the House. In May this year, there was a vote to hold sittings in Westminster Hall. It is easy for hon. Members to forget that we make decisions of this kind, and sometimes we overlook the vast amount of work necessary to enable them to be carried to fruition. Certainly, it is easier to overlook the scale of that work because of the sang froid that the Serjeant and his Department showed in reacting to a major change in their carefully worked out programme and to bringing forward works which had been planned to take place only in future years.

The outcome of our decision compelled the officers of the House to tear up expenditure plans after the onset of the financial year and to completely refit one of the major rooms in the Palace. It is a real and concrete tribute to the leadership of the Serjeant at Arms that the work was successfully completed in the time available, and again under budget. I know that many hon. Members on both sides feel that he presided over a smaller, but no less significant, reform, in the replacement of the House of Commons barber by a House of Commons hairdresser.

Members are aware of how seriously the House has always taken its links with other Parliaments. We have always been particularly concerned to promote co-operation between Commonwealth Parliaments, and to ensure that we have the opportunity to learn from one another. Peter Jennings was instrumental in ensuring that co-operation extended to Serjeants at Arms across the Commonwealth.

The first Commonwealth Serjeants at Arms conference was held in 1994 and the second in August 1999, with over 30 such Serjeants gathered together. That is, at first sight, a rather unnerving thought, given the Serjeants' tradition of carrying a sword. However, I am told that the only remarkable aspect was that the Serjeant from Tonga wore his country's customary dress of a skirt, unlike our own dear Serjeants, who wear tights.

I am sure that all hon. Members will join me in wishing to place firmly on record our great appreciation of the service that Peter Jennings has done this House, and of the courtesy and consideration with which that service has been performed. The House will join me in wishing him and his wife Shirley Anne a long and very happy retirement—as well as a happy Christmas—and in expressing our appreciation of all that they have done for us.

2.5 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): On behalf of the Opposition, I join the Leader of the House in her tribute to Peter Jennings, the 36th Serjeant at Arms since the post was established in 1415. During the 23 years that he has been here, there has been a quiet revolution in the way that the House operates, including a major improvement in the quality of accommodation; a huge extension of the security precautions; a big increase in the number of people working here and visiting Parliament; the introduction of broadcasting and new information technology; and, as the Leader of the House remarked, a major building and renovation programme. The House decided on all those changes, but they had to be implemented, which required a range of skills, from project management to people management. The Serjeant had those skills. He has overseen the successful introduction of those reforms for which the whole House is indebted to him. Behind the scenes, the Serjeant has also had to defuse many other issues, which mercifully never reach the public eye.

Peter Jennings has had a career of distinguished and selfless public service, lasting nearly 50 years. We wish him and his wife Shirley Anne a long and happy retirement in Fulham. We also hope that they continue to visit their many friends in Parliament and we are sure that when they do so, they will be waved through the security system each time.

2.6 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am delighted to endorse this motion on behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends and on behalf of several other parties represented in the House. As the Leader of the House said, the motion is endorsed by the leading members of eight parties, and that demonstrates the wide respect and appreciation that we all feel for Mr. Jennings.

As the Leader of the House and the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) mentioned, the changes that have taken place during Mr. Jennings'

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

service to the House have been dramatic, not least in the security arrangements and the accommodation available to Members and their staff. The Leader of the House mentioned the accommodation she had when she first came to the House. When I was first elected, I had the end of a table in a room with seven Glaswegian Labour Members of Parliament. They did not understand a Cornishman and I did not understand them. The one telephone was nearest to my part of the room and I had to take messages on behalf of them all.

Dramatic changes have taken place in this House and we often do not understand, appreciate or pay respect to the work that is done by all servants of the House to make this building work efficiently in the interests of Parliament and parliamentary democracy. Mr. Jennings has led a professional, dedicated team over several years and this is a good opportunity for us all to express our appreciation to them.

2.8 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): I wish briefly to add my appreciation. When the House recognises the retirement of the Clerk, Librarian or Serjeant, we are for a moment referring to the people who make the parliamentary family work. I have been here longer than anyone who is present in the Chamber and I remember when I had only a locker, let alone a table. I was told that I could not bring a tape recorder into the House to dictate for my secretary, because that was illegal. I am the only Member of the House to have been kept out by force by the Serjeant when my blood had turned blue. More recently, I accidentally set fire to my room in the House of Commons by tapping out my pipe in my wastepaper basket. I had such a friendly message about it from the Serjeant that I felt really at home.

People outside do not realise the role the Serjeant plays. When a senior Member of Parliament is asked to arrange a meeting and says that he will have to clear it with the Serjeant, people from outside wonder who this mysterious person is who appears to run the place. All the room bookings, and the doorkeepers and attendants who keep the place going, are under the supervision of the Serjeant and I wish to express my personal thanks to him.

I have put up a bronze plaque to commemorate the work of the staff of the House, including the Serjeant. It was put up illegally, so it was taken down. It went up again, it was taken down again and—with the help of the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack)—now has a permanent place near the Admission Order office. In that spirit, I join in the general thanks to Mr. Jennings.

2.9 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): It is a great privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). My credentials for speaking are that Mr. Jennings is my constituent. I am extremely proud of all my constituents, but I am especially proud of Mr. Jennings for all the reasons that have been adduced by other right hon. and hon. Members in this debate.

I have a secondary and personal reason for wanting to contribute to this debate, of which the House may be aware. Mr. Jennings and I attended the same school for 14 terms. It is possible, therefore, that I have known him longer than any other hon. Member. I am a trustee of the school's old pupils club.

I think that I am right in saying that Mr. Jennings is the only person of his particular serving officer rank to hold the office of Serjeant at Arms. It is a great tribute to his personality and ability that he should have been so selected. Those of us who were at the school that Mr. Jennings and I attended also take vicarious credit from the effect that the school must have had on him.

2.10 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): My reason for rising is that I am an evergreen Back Bencher. Perhaps more than most, therefore, I appreciate the work done by the Serjeant at Arms. My contribution to this short debate is a simple expression of thanks to Peter Jennings for the outstanding service that he has rendered to the House and to Back Benchers over the years that he has been with us.

I wish to thank him especially for the invariable courtesy and friendship with which he has undertaken his work. That was outlined in a simple way by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). We shall miss him, and we wish him and his wife a very happy retirement.

2.11 pm

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I confess that I did not attend the same school as the retiring Serjeant at Arms, but in my time in the House I have probably booked as many Rooms as any other hon. Member, and for a greater variety of organisations than most would care to remember. I wish to put on record my thanks to the Serjeant at Arms and his staff, who have always treated hon. Members and visiting members of the public with unfailing help and courtesy.

On one occasion, Amnesty International asked me to book a Room. When that filled up with 30 people, a different Room was booked, which filled up with 60 people, and so a third was booked, which filled up with 90 people. The transitions were seamless. Very rapidly, the whole building was taken over by human rights campaigners, but there was no problem at all because the Serjeant at Arms Department was so helpful. It is fitting, therefore, for hon. Members to express thanks for the work done on our behalf.

I mean no criticism of the retiring Serjeant at Arms at all, but I hope that the next incumbent will receive two instructions from the House. The first would be that space should be found in the House for a nursery, which could replace the rifle range or some other facility. The second would be that no staff of the Serjeant at Arms Department will be privatised or sent out to contract. I hope that the House will insist that all employees will be retained on proper terms and conditions, as they all should be.

I end by thanking the Serjeant at Arms very much for all his help and courtesy over the years.

2.13 pm

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I, too, wish to put on record my personal thanks to Mr. Jennings. During his time in the House, he will have seen many women Members of Parliament arrive. The way in which he has dealt with our applications for improved facilities such as the Family Room is greatly appreciated. On behalf

of many Back Benchers, I should like to express my thanks to him for all the work that he has done for this place.

Madam Speaker: The House is very grateful for those tributes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House expresses its appreciation of Peter Nevile Wake Jennings Esq, CVO for his 47 years distinguished public service, including four years as Serjeant at Arms, and extends to him its best wishes for his retirement.

World Trade Organisation

[Relevant documents: Second Report from the Environmental Audit Committee, on World Trade and Sustainable Development: an Agenda for the Seattle Summit (HC 45); Sixteenth Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1998–99, on Multilateral Environmental Agreements (HC 307-I).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Madam Speaker: Before I call the Secretary of State, I have to inform Back Benchers that speeches must be limited to 15 minutes.

2.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): I welcome this timely opportunity to report to the House on the conclusions of the Seattle World Trade Organisation negotiations, and also to debate the way to carry forward the need for trade liberalisation in the 21st century.

However, before I do that, I wish to thank the three right hon. Friends who, with me, made up the United Kingdom delegation to the ministerial conference. They are my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for International Development, the Minister for Trade and the Minister for the Environment.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Does not the Secretary of State agree that the four Ministers in the United Kingdom delegation, however well intentioned they may have been, were effectively observers, as the true negotiating power was in the hands of the European Commissioner? How long can that dismal state of affairs be allowed to endure?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman has revealed his ignorance in record-breaking time. I am conscious of the fact that Back Benchers want to take part in the debate. I want them to do so, which is why there is a time limit on speeches and why I shall cut my initial remarks fairly short. Interventions such as that from the hon. Gentleman do not help very much, as they do not follow the plot at all.

Mr. Swayne: Answer the question.

Mr. Byers: I will. As members of the General Affairs Council, we played a part in determining the European Union position. More significantly, as members of the Commonwealth, we had many bilateral meetings with Commonwealth countries. We were instrumental in putting in place a broad agreement on trade and labour relations. We also discussed with other countries—especially the least developed—what we could do in terms of opening access to the European market. The non-governmental organisations in attendance at Seattle welcomed the role that our delegation played, as did those of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues who also attended the negotiations.

I want also to thank the non-ministerial members of the delegation—Donald Anderson, representing the Confederation of British Industry; Rodney Bickerstaffe,

[Mr. Byers]

representing the Trades Union Congress; and Hilary Colby, representing the voluntary and charitable organisations. Our inclusive approach to the people who formed the delegation broke new ground.

I also want to thank the officials of the various Government Departments who attended the talks. In often difficult and demanding circumstances, they provided necessary support to Ministers and others.

I shall say something about the importance of trade to the United Kingdom, and then go through the events in Seattle and describe how matters can be moved forward.

We should never underestimate the importance of trade to our country. More than a quarter of our gross domestic product stems from exports, and more than half from trade. We are the world's fifth largest exporter of goods, and the second largest exporter of services. Our share of world exports of goods is about 5 per cent. The UK has the highest ratio of inward and outward investment to GDP of any leading economy.

The UK is the second largest recipient of inward investment after the United States, and we are the second largest outward investor after the United States. In short, therefore, trade is vital to the UK's continuing prosperity. We need to secure that for the future, but we also need to create the same opportunities for the rest of the world.

That is why we are disappointed that the terms for a new round of trade negotiations were not agreed in Seattle. Along with most other WTO members, we had hoped to launch a comprehensive and broad-based round of negotiations. That approach reflects our belief that such a round is the best means of delivering substantial trade liberalisation consistent with sustainable development. Such a package would also promote continuing growth in the global economy, helping to offset protectionist tendencies where they exist—as, regrettably, they do.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): The United Kingdom, rightly, has developed a good reputation for taking a progressive stance in these matters. However, with hindsight, was it right to go for a comprehensive round of new negotiations? Would it not have been better to concentrate on making the existing rules more effective, specifically by assisting developing countries by withdrawing tariffs against their exports?

Mr. Byers: I agree absolutely that it would have been a great prize if the UK initiative to remove all tariff barriers placed on goods had been agreed. However, that initiative is part not of a narrow agenda but of a broad-based approach. The narrow agenda would have been limited to agriculture and services, and there would have been nothing at all for developing countries or the least developed countries. We wanted a comprehensive round—a development round—for the purposes to which my hon. Friend referred. A narrow round would not have delivered the benefits that we wanted to bring to those developing countries. We needed a broad-based and comprehensive round of trade negotiations, and we bitterly regretted being unable to conclude that at the end of the Seattle negotiations.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): The Secretary of State says that he wanted a broad round in which to discuss development. Was he not disturbed that so many developing countries were not present at the talks? I understand that 30 were unable to send delegations, and that many more had very scanty representation. If this was a development round, should we not have paid more attention to that issue?

Mr. Byers: There are two points to make. First, the Government have indicated to the director general of the WTO that we will support a fivefold increase in the budget for technical assistance and capacity building for developing countries. Secondly, we helped countries that were present at Seattle but had not had any briefing or support before they got there. A civil servant from my Department briefed delegates from some of the African countries about the mechanism and process of Seattle. Although that should never have had to happen, we were able to play a valuable role in providing time for information to be given to those African countries. They came away from the briefing meeting saying that it was the most valuable hour they had spent in Seattle.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): We are obviously pleased that an official was able to assist countries that did not have full delegations; but surely the issue—according to reports that I have read—is that a large number of delegations from southern and third-world countries were denied access to all meetings and discussions. They had to read about the proceedings in the newspapers because the American delegation refused to allow them in.

The Americans also appear to have used incredibly heavy-handed policing tactics against people who were legitimately protesting on behalf of the poorest peoples in the world while their future was being decided behind closed doors by a few very wealthy countries.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes a good case for modernisation and reform. I am pleased that he recognises that one responsibility of Government is to modernise and reform many of our institutions. There is a modernising and reforming agenda for the WTO, which I shall outline shortly. A key objective must be to ensure that all 135 member nations have a part to play in the process. I accept that that is not the case at the moment. The challenge for the United Kingdom is to lead the campaign for reform of the WTO so that all members can play a full part.

The ministerial conference was extremely significant in terms of global politics. Probably for the first time in any such international gathering, the developing countries asserted themselves and said that it was unacceptable for a deal to be carved out between America, the European Union and Japan but not the developing countries themselves. If anything positive has come out of Seattle it is the fact that for the first time on the international stage those developing countries have said no. That is extremely significant for the future. We need to build on that and recognise that all 135 members must be incorporated into the process of the WTO.

I believe that free trade and open commerce are the best way forward. Freeing up trade means lower prices and wider choice for consumers; and it stimulates competition and innovation, promotes economic growth, particularly in developing economies, and generates the resources to promote higher standards of employment and

environmental protection. Ultimately, it helps to underpin political stability throughout the world. That is why we wanted a broad-based approach to the negotiations. It is important to recognise that the trade discussions in Seattle took place against a backdrop of growing concerns about globalisation. Indeed, many of the people who took to the streets of Seattle were concerned about globalisation. We must ask ourselves whether globalisation is, by its very nature, a bad thing. Will it destroy our environment and our traditional livelihood, and increase the gap between rich and poor?

I believe that globalisation is useful and necessary—indeed, it is essential. It is the basis for our prosperity and that of our fellow human beings. We have no alternative to globalisation for achieving those objectives. Globalisation allows economies of scale and the development of economic activities at a much faster and more sustained rate than would otherwise be possible. Economies of scale and growth are necessary to support our growing population. We need the benefits of emerging new industries to allow us to improve the living conditions of all our people.

Opening up markets gives the opportunity to those economies which need to strengthen their development. We saw the tremendous evolution that took place in Asia during the 1980s. Now we can see the successful building of economies emerging from decades of state control in eastern Europe. We have also seen how some, but not all, developing countries have benefited from the Uruguay round.

I also recognise that if we get it wrong, globalisation can be a negative force. It could lead to environmental damage, the destruction of traditional cultures, and the widening, instead of the narrowing, of the gap between rich and poor that exists both between countries and within societies. It is up to us to ensure that we reap the benefits of globalisation and avoid its drawbacks.

We have a choice: we can let globalisation carry us along, and do nothing about it, or we can try and steer it in a way that produces the results that we want. I believe that the WTO is the vehicle for steering globalisation in a direction that will benefit all the countries of the world.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Does my right hon. Friend accept that if world trade is one part of the globalisation process, it is equally important to have multilateral environmental agreements which are, as it were, the controlling part of it? Will he explain the Government's position in ensuring that the World Trade Organisation will not obstruct those important multilateral environmental agreements?

Mr. Byers: I have sympathy with my hon. Friend's point, and if he can wait a couple of minutes, I hope to be able to address it specifically.

We would be foolish not to recognise the important role that the WTO can play. As is clear from what has happened in recent years, free trade leads to greater prosperity. That is why we should be concerned that there was no successful outcome in Seattle. It is legitimate to ask what went wrong. First, the work was not done in the lead-up to the ministerial conference. There was not sufficient common ground identified in advance. We went to Seattle with a 36-page draft declaration, most of which was simply not agreed. Secondly, there was a lack of organisation in Seattle to deliver a declaration at the end of the ministerial conference; and thirdly, there was a growing concern by many developing countries about their lack of involvement in the decision-making process. They rightly considered decisions on the launch of a new round to be of such importance that they demanded inclusion. They needed to take part in the building of a consensus, rather than being presented with a done deal by the big players. One reason why agreement was not reached was that they called a halt to the process.

I believe that Seattle was a missed opportunity. We must learn from the mistakes of Seattle and build a stronger WTO. We know from the history of the general agreement on tariffs and trade, and now the WTO, that there is no alternative to a rules-based system for international trade. Like the Labour Government who launched GATT in 1948, this Government want to ensure that they can reform and strengthen the WTO so that it can meet the demands and challenges of the 21st century. We should not overanalyse what happened at Seattle, or get into a blame game. We must instead ensure changes for the future.

It is crucial that the WTO should be modernised and reformed. The United Kingdom will lead those efforts. We have already contacted the EU Trade Commissioner, Pascal Lamy, and have been in touch with all EU Trade Ministers. We have also contacted like-minded countries that support reform, including Egypt, South Africa and Australia.

As we look towards change of the WTO, we must consider several points. We should make WTO documents publicly available and develop effective mechanisms to consult more widely. There should be far greater transparency over dispute settlement. We should consider establishing a better mechanism to allow non-governmental organisations to express their views. We need to change the WTO decision-making structure, and that will require consideration of better ways to build consensus. With 135 members, each of which can exercise a veto, the WTO is often deadlocked and unable to reach a decision.

We must consider having some form of parliamentary assembly to allow a greater degree of accountability. The WTO also needs a clear programme of technical assistance and capacity building for developing countries. I have written to the director general to say that the UK Government would support a fivefold increase in the WTO budget for that purpose.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): However desirable many of those things are, does the Secretary of State agree that the launch of a new round must not be dependent on the achievement of reforms? The important thing is to get the new round under way, and the reforms can be addressed in parallel with it.

Mr. Byers: I do not disagree, but I do not think that the two processes are mutually exclusive. I would not want negotiations on a new round to be held back by lack of completion of WTO reform. If the two things can be done simultaneously, so much the better. There is a question of how much progress can be made next year on negotiations because of politics elsewhere in the world. For reasons of which the right hon. Gentleman will be fully aware, it may be some time after January 2001 before we can engage in the detailed negotiations required.

[Mr. Byers]

We can make progress in detailed areas of the negotiations, however. Even though there was no formal agreement on the launch of a new round, a lot can be done in the meantime, without waiting for the reform programme to be put in place. The first area in which we should try to achieve progress as soon as possible is liberalisation in agriculture and services. That would have been the narrow agenda, had we stuck to it. Negotiations should begin as planned in 2000. The UK has strong interests in those areas, and we shall continue to pursue them. At the same time, while we cannot expect to do all that would be achieved in a broad-based round because of the flexibility and building of broader political support that that would imply, we can still make important progress.

Secondly, we can continue to make the case for further comprehensive liberalisation of industrial tariffs as part of the new round. Thirdly, we must push for consensus in the WTO on the need to address growing consumer interests in trade, particularly through more expansive work on labelling, through reform of anti-dumping rules and through an increase in transparency. All that would have to be included in the new round if we were to make substantive progress.

Fourthly, we must do more to build consensus on including trade and environment as issues for the new round, as my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) said. Much concern exists in that connection. Some developing countries take the view that bringing the environment into trade negotiations could be used for protectionism. We should be aware of those concerns, but they should not allow us to hold back on the need to recognise that greater trade liberalisation must acknowledge the consequences to the environment of development.

We can have multilateral environmental agreements, but there is some dispute about how they would interact with the rules adopted by the WTO. The UK would argue that as part of a new and comprehensive round we should clarify the WTO rules to make them compatible with important multilateral environmental agreements. Those issues must be included in the new round when it is launched.

We must do all that we can to include investment and competition. From Seattle, we know that concerns exist about those two areas. We have to show that there are benefits from them for all 135 members, and that our ambitions in that respect are modest. Part of the problem is that the talks on the multilateral agreement on investment discredited any real discussion of investment. The MAI was launched under the aegis of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and many member nations were not within the loop of involvement. Understandably, therefore, they resisted discussion of investment.

In the WTO—an inclusive body in which all 135 members must agree—there is real potential for putting in place effective rules on investment, and that should be an important part of the agenda for the future. Electronic commerce must also be reflected in trade rules. That is not so at present, and much needs to be done. We must roll forward the duty-free commitment if we are to ensure that we can create the right environment for electronic commerce to continue to develop in future.

We must do more for developing countries. The United Kingdom has called for the EU to advance the initiative on developing and providing duty-free access to products from the least developed countries. When the General Affairs Council of the EU met in private at the end of the Seattle conference, we agreed that we should carry forward the proposal to provide duty-free access on our own initiative. Even if America and Japan do not agree, the EU will act because it is the right thing to do. How can poor countries develop, or even pay their debts, if we refuse to buy their products? The EU will take a unilateral initiative to open up our markets to those goods.

Labour standards and trade were among the most difficult issues on the Seattle agenda. We aim to build on recent progress in the International Labour Organisation to gain wider respect for internationally agreed core labour standards, including the recently agreed ILO convention on child labour. Trade and labour standards policies are not in conflict. Both policy objectives can and should be pursued in parallel. We are firmly opposed to the use of trade sanctions to enforce labour standards. Driving countries into even deeper poverty will not improve their labour standards.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Does the Secretary of State agree that if that position is to be accepted—the Conservatives entirely agree with it—the international community must pay the same respect to labour and environmental standards as it does to the work of the WTO? A disproportion of respect lies at the heart of the concern expressed by many non-governmental organisations and others.

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It is a question of how the WTO rules are enforced. One reason why many people want to bring matters within the WTO is that it has an extremely effective enforcement mechanism, whereas many other international organisations do not. I believe that that is a case for reforming some of those other organisations to make them more effective, not trying to bring everything within the WTO's remit. However, that is a matter on which there is, we hope, agreement on both sides of the House.

There is one labour standards issue from which we cannot walk away. We have an opportunity to bring together international organisations such as the ILO, the WTO, the United Nations and the World Bank to identify ways in which we can lift countries out of poverty in a positive way, in the belief that by doing so we are more likely to secure improvements in labour standards. That is a far more effective way forward.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Will my right hon. Friend explain why the Government have not embodied in statute in Britain the commitments on trade union rights into which they entered in the International Labour Organisation? Is he aware that the Employment Rights (International Obligations) Bill has been presented, supported by nearly 50 hon. Members and, I think, eight general secretaries? It argues simply that international commitments into which we have entered ought to be embodied in British law so that they are applied in this country.

Mr. Byers: That will always be a matter for the House to determine. The Government's view is that we have,

in our own way—through the Employment Relations Act 1999—provided a fair framework for employment legislation. That is the way in which we intend to deal with those matters.

As a result, effectively, of an initiative taken by the UK delegation in Seattle, we believe that there is now a broad-based consensus for an approach that allows the international organisations to reflect on the relationship between poverty, globalisation, labour standards and trade liberalisation. We hope that a consensus can be achieved within the framework that we were able to promote while we were in Seattle, which can ensure that that issue will not be ignored.

Briefly, on China's membership of the WTO, as hon. Members will be aware, just before the Seattle conference began the United States reached an agreement with China about the terms under which the US Administration would agree to Chinese accession.

The European Union has not yet agreed such an arrangement with the Government of China. We expect the EU to begin negotiations some time in the new year with representatives of the Chinese Government. Once we have secured agreement, we can ensure that China can become a member of the WTO. We want that objective to be achieved, but on appropriate terms. Detailed negotiations will have to take place with China to ensure that, as far as the United Kingdom and the European Union are concerned, its membership is on satisfactory terms.

Mr. Curry: Did the American delegation explain how it reconciled its discussions to allow China into the WTO with its preference for labour standards reinforced by trade sanctions?

Mr. Byers: I think that it would have had difficulty reconciling the two, but that is probably best left to representatives of the American Government. I am not going to try to defend that one.

We believe that if the terms are right, it is appropriate for China to be a member of the WTO. If it becomes a full member, the whole dynamics of the organisation will change dramatically. Some of those countries that stand out against labour standards having anything to do with the WTO at the moment may suddenly find that there are some benefits in such standards being included. However, we must be careful. Many of us listening to the debate in Seattle felt that the motive behind the speeches of those who most strongly promoted the inclusion of core labour standards was not to help the conditions of the workers concerned but to protect the domestic market. Sometimes we need to study carefully the reasoning that is being put forward to support that proposal.

I shall draw my remarks to a conclusion as many Back-Bench Members wish to speak. There are those who say that globalisation and trade liberalisation carry much of the blame for any economic crisis that may occur. They see the trends of globalisation and trade liberalisation as innately harmful, bringing benefits only to a handful of multinational companies, widening the gap between the richest and poorest, threatening the environment and undermining social structures. Such people can be found at all stages of human history, casting doubt on progress and pointing to the ills it allegedly brings, while ignoring the benefits. Today, their modern counterparts reject the markets and the concept of economic growth. They dismiss profit as greed and see science and technology as a threat rather than as a means of improving people's lives.

There is no doubt that progress pursued blindly and without thought for the consequences carries with it risks and costs. However, by working together we can confound the critics and show that globalisation and trade liberalisation together can be a decisive force for good. In our democratic society, we need to work at convincing our electorate that these changes are to be welcomed rather than to be feared.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I welcome the Secretary of State's clear belief that the extension of global free trade benefits all. It was hard for those of us who read what was in the press—because of all the smoke, fuss and tear gas—to get a feel for what happened in the meeting. Will the right hon. Gentleman report to the House the consensus in those serious discussions on achieving a worthwhile extension of free trade after the presidential elections in America?

Mr. Byers: I referred to January 2001 as, perhaps, a witching moment when real progress could be made. There may be opportunities, post the American presidential elections, that are not there at the moment. We all appreciate that domestic politics are playing a role within the United States. We have to ensure that, come 2001, the structure is in place to drive forward the trade liberalisation agenda. The message has to be clear throughout the world that if we want prosperity, it comes through free trade and open commerce. Our history shows us that.

I was reading in a newspaper the other day an interesting analysis of what happened in China in the 1400s when a caucus of mandarins managed to convince the emperor that free trade was not a good idea. They began by blocking craftsmen from working in the shipyards because they did not want ships to be built to trade. They then made it a criminal offence to build a three-masted schooner because they were worried about the trade implications.

Mr. Paterson: The article was written by my brother-in-law.

Mr. Byers: There we are. It was by Matt Ridley—a good man. In 1551, it became a capital offence to set sail in a multi-masted ship. As a result, there were four centuries of economic decline in China. *[Interruption.]* My constituency would love to build the ships.

The lesson and the reality is that throughout our history, in whatever country, free trade has been a bringer of prosperity. In the modern day, the issue is how we can harness the benefits of free trade. The WTO is the body that can do it. Globalisation, through the free flow of foreign direct investments, leads to a more equal distribution of capital, greater competition and productivity, and to wealth creation and growth in employment. Potentially, everyone can be a winner.

Nor does globalisation represent the pursuit of irresponsible gain by large business. The decision to invest capital, technology and human skills is not one that is taken lightly. No one should doubt the immense benefit

[Mr. Byers]

to the global economy brought by the progressive opening up of markets and international trade in the past 50 years. We also know that, if markets are closed, prosperity and growth will be denied. Protectionism anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere. We need more trade liberalisation, not less.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): The European Union market is currently closed to US beef that has been treated with hormones. How would the new WTO adjudicate in disputes such as those over genetically modified foods, hormone-treated beef or biotechnology? Those matters are incredibly contentious even within countries.

Mr. Byers: I agree that they are contentious. That is why we need a rules-based mechanism that will allow us to achieve our objective. One of the disappointments at the failure to reach a conclusion at Seattle related to issues that could have been part of a broad-based round. They include the whole question of scientific evidence and how the WTO deals with it; consumer choice and labelling, so that people can make genuine choices—this is especially important for the environment; and food safety. That is why we believed that it was important to adopt a comprehensive approach. It is also why a narrow round—as supported by Opposition Members—would not have been successful.

The challenge that we now face is how to move forward within the WTO. The events of Seattle are a defining moment for the WTO. A reformed and modernised WTO can deliver for all the world's people. A broad and comprehensive trade round, early in the 21st century, will play an important part in achieving that objective.

2.51 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): It has been a joy to observe the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on his journey along the road to Damascus. Many of us will remember his comments and those of many of his hon. Friends during the previous Parliament, when the Conservatives spoke about competition, free markets and global trade. I genuinely welcome much of what he said this afternoon. I recognise much of the closing part of his speech; it came from the well written speech that he gave recently to Japanese business men—the right hon. Gentleman is nodding. I did not agree with everything in that earlier speech, but I share his view on globalisation, which he has repeated this afternoon.

The Secretary of State told us of his disappointment that the talks had broken down. We share that disappointment, but we regret that it took him four days to come to the Dispatch Box. A fortnight ago, he will remember sending a letter—also signed by three of his hon. Friends—to all hon. Members, to brief them on the forthcoming WTO talks. The letter concluded:

"Stephen will be making a full statement to the House immediately on our return from Seattle."

As there will be many more talks on this subject, in this country and abroad, I hope that the Secretary of State will include the House of Commons in the way forward. We share much common ground, because we all want the talks to proceed as quickly as possible, but with a realistic agenda that enables us to achieve solid progress for global free trade. Conservative policy is that all tariff barriers should be removed by 2020.

Before me at the Dispatch Box, I am using, as an impromptu lectern, a bundle of papers, detailing about 15,600 tariffs that apply to this country alone—the integrated tariff of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Corbyn: Read them all out.

Mrs. Browning: I promise the House that I shall not read them out this afternoon, but if, during this Parliament, the Secretary of State agrees that his objective of removing tariff barriers is realistic, I will be only too pleased to read out the reduced bundle that will result.

Mr. Corbyn: I am pleased to see that the hon. Lady has all 15,600 tariffs in front of her. I realise that there is not time for her to read them all out this afternoon. Could she give us a summary of those to which she objects? There are three hours left for the debate.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman is most kind. The papers are available to all Members from the Stationery Office—other people have to pay £197 per bundle.

However much we talk about the need for liberalisation, tariff reductions and free trade, we confront a huge task—not just in the UK, but in the EU and in America—in achieving those targets. We need to get rid of all the tariffs, because they hamper free trade. The Secretary of State is committed to removing them and the Conservatives will support him. That is our objective in today's debate.

Mr. Bennett: Will the hon. Lady assure us that none of the restrictions in her bundle of papers are supported by individuals or firms in her constituency? Has there been any lobbying to keep restrictions?

Mrs. Browning: I have not read every line of each sheet of paper. Both sides of the paper are covered with small-point print. My constituents—like those of all hon. Members—realise that the prosperity of our country and of all those who live and work here will be enhanced by the removal of such tariffs. There seems to be some common ground in the House on that objective.

I encourage the Minister and his colleagues on the Treasury Bench to consider how we might achieve that objective, because the collapse of the Seattle talks was a blow. The Secretary of State spelled out the importance of international and global trade to the UK and to the EU. I am aware that, in the context of the WTO talks, the EU Commissioner spoke for all member states.

There are however some examples of stupid taxes—I am sure that others could be found in bundles similar to the one I have before me. Because of the EU tariff wall, there is a tax of 8.9 per cent. on chocolate from outside the EU, and a 9.7 per cent. tariff on biscuits. As I pointed out, the EU alone has 15,600 tariff duties, but they are also imposed in other states. The United States, which is often regarded as a free trade economy, applies a 25 per cent. tax on ceramics sold from the midlands in this country to the US hotel industry. That is a classic example of the way in which a single tariff affects an important

UK industry. Such tariffs affect our exports to the US. There is a huge opportunity for the EU and the US to take a lead in showing how to remove those unnecessary taxes.

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): I listened with interest to the points made by the hon. Lady about the 15,600 double-sided, small-point tariffs that she is using as a prop. Will she inform the House of how many of those 15,600 tariffs were agreed during the 18 years of Conservative Government? How many of them did she and the Conservative Government object to?

Mrs. Browning: I do not know. This collection has been built up over generations. I just want to see them disappear. It makes sense to get rid of all of them. I am not talking about which tariff was applied where and by whom. We all know that trade will enhance the prosperity of our nation and of nations throughout the world, if we get rid of restrictions.

We need to concentrate on the WTO talks, because the Secretary of State has a prime responsibility, on behalf of the UK Government, to ensure that our nation plays its part in restoring the WTO talks so that we can make progress.

We started out some months ago with high hopes. The Department of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food issued consultation documents. The European Parliament produced a document. We had papers from the United States Government. That suggested that things were on course—that there was sufficient commonality of purpose to adopt the agenda that the Secretary of State has described and to progress with talks. Obviously, we must now have another think about that.

Today the right hon. Gentleman has frankly described some of his proposals for taking the matter forward, but taking the matter forward must be our primary intention.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned that the WTO talks and the talks from which they originate have been subject to criticism. I agree with him. There is now an opportunity to change the way in which the structure of the WTO functions, to make progress possible.

In the list of suggestions that the Secretary of State read out, his suggestion that there be some form of Parliament rang the loudest warning bells in my mind. We would want to see full details of that. I doubt that the creation of another body without democratic accountability will liberalise trade. We want there to be democratic accountability. Indeed, we are uneasy about the way in which the United Kingdom is represented, through the European Union, in the talks. Later I shall discuss what happened in Seattle—the role of the European Union and the way in which events unfolded. I hope that then the Secretary of State will reassure us that he will speak to Commissioner Lamy and others to ensure that our progress is not held up because of differences of opinion in the European Union, or because the views of the British Government as to what is in the British interest are not reflected.

The principles of multilateral trading are designed to help trade to flow as freely as possible. They should incorporate non-discrimination—one country should not offer another country more favoured terms of access to its markets than it does others. Tariff barriers should be removed and trading conditions should be predictable. Most WTO members' tariffs are bound at ceiling rates, above which they cannot usually be increased, and almost all developed country tariffs are bound at their actual rates. The introduction of quotas or other measures intended to restrict imports is not usually permitted. We need to consider how we can abolish tariffs rather than gerrymander the way in which tariffs and ceilings are imposed.

The Secretary of State used the word transparency. The WTO should undertake to ensure that its trade rules are clear, transparent and public, so that all new rules, as they emerge, are subject to proper scrutiny by all interested parties. Judging by what the Secretary of State has said, I hope that he would actively promote such steps.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): While the hon. Lady discusses tariff removal, is she aware that by far the largest bulk of that paper on her desk consists of two items—the tariff structure of the standard international trade classification, items 65 and 80 to 84, which are textiles and clothing? Is she saying—with commendable bravery—that the Conservative party is committed to the prompt and total removal of all tariffs and quotas on textile and garment items?

Mrs. Browning: We would like to see them phased out, but that will be part of future negotiations. At the moment, there are not even any negotiations to participate in. There is unfinished business from the Uruguay round, and the textiles issue is part of the unfinished business from a previous trade round which the Secretary of State must tackle.

Later, I shall discuss some serious matters that are unfinished business from the Uruguay round, on which I believe that the Secretary of State should seek to make progress now, instead of waiting for a new round of talks to begin. I hope that we shall hear from him and his colleagues how they intend to go about that.

The Secretary of State asked what went wrong at Seattle. He obviously had the advantage of being present. I have taken briefings from others who were also present at those talks—

Mr. Bennett: Name them.

Mr. Corbyn: Name them.

Mrs. Browning: My right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) was present. I am sure that he will address the House and give his own views.

Mr. Corbyn: I was trying to help the hon. Lady.

Mrs. Browning: I am not giving the hon. Gentleman the credit.

Mr. Corbyn *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I shall not give way.

The Secretary of State has quoted a speech that he made to Japanese business men but, given the speech that he delivered at Seattle, one does not get the impression that he was aware, while he was there, of the need for him to

[Mrs. Browning]

take such a leading role in bringing forward changes. I have with me a copy of his speech, in which he addresses fellow trade Ministers and the director-general.

In that rather short speech there was no attempt to retrieve the situation or make an input into the talks. Instead, the speech contained a lot of platitudes and some rather waffly language—certainly nothing as firm as the speech from which the right hon. Gentleman quoted this afternoon. For example, he asked:

"Can the WTO modernise and reform itself so that it can gain increased credibility and win the support of people and their governments? Can it stop being seen as a servant of multinationals and instead assert itself as a body which will protect and defend the interests of all its members?"

In that speech, delivered by the Secretary of State on behalf of the United Kingdom Government, he seemed to have more questions than answers.

There are a lot of platitudes:

"We must not lose sight of the opportunities that have flowed from the new age of globalisation. We have benefited from the integration of the international economy. A shared commitment to open trade and commerce has been a driving force for growth."

That is not what we would have expected from a Secretary of State in a world negotiation when things were falling apart around him and when he was in a key position to make a much more substantive contribution—perhaps the type of contribution that he has made in the House this afternoon, with real suggestions about what could be done, instead of platitudes.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): In view of the platitudes that are supposed to have come from the Government—on which the hon. Lady is totally wrong—I am curious to know what the previous Conservative Government did to remove the tariffs on ceramics supplied from the United Kingdom to hotels everywhere.

Mrs. Browning: I do not recall any of the rounds in which the previous Conservative Government were engaged resulting in the Secretary of State coming to the House to wring his hands and tell us that everything had fallen apart in disarray, that something had to be done, but perhaps not for another year, and that there was no immediate solution to the problems. That is not leadership; nor is it Government.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I am just answering the question. I raised the matter because at Seattle there were two main players with whom we would have expected our Secretary of State, representing the Government whom he represents, to have had much more influence.

The Government claim to be influential in the European Union, which was a key negotiator. The rhetoric of the Labour party, especially in opposition, was to the effect that when there were difficult negotiations, and when there were difficulties with the European Union, it had a third way. Labour Members claimed that they would use their skills far more effectively than the previous Conservative Government had. And yet in one week we see our eurobond market about to disappear, our art market about to disappear and our beef industry in disarray—because the Government were unable to negotiate with their European partners, with whom they have always claimed to have a technique superior to that of the previous, Conservative Government.

Each day, week and year that passes, it becomes more obvious that the only things that the Labour Government succeed at as far as the European Union is concerned are matters where their third way—new Labour socialism—is in total accord with the new way socialism of many of the member states in Europe. They just roll over and agree with them when they have issues of new socialism—democratic socialism—to deal with. *[Laughter.]* I did not want to say just socialism, because I know that when anyone says that word, a frisson descends on the Labour Benches. I was struggling to get the new terminology right. However, Labour Members know what I mean—it is the third way. However, that is the way of failure. The third way of negotiating any matter involving the European Union has been, by definition and as a matter of record, a great failure.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): May I remind my hon. Friend of an example of what she describes? The Prime Minister said proudly:

"we are delighted with the decision to lift the beef ban . . . That has come about because of the hard work of Ministers here"—

that may be true—

"and also because the Government have a constructive . . . attitude to Europe. That is why we got the beef ban lifted, and it is another example of new Labour working."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 402.]

Does my hon. Friend recall that?

Mrs. Browning: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving us the complete text of the Prime Minister's words.

The success of Commissioner Lamy is important to the United Kingdom. He represents us. What he said and did at Seattle was far more significant than the platitudes in the Secretary of State's contribution. It is therefore incumbent on the Government to ensure—especially as things have now fallen apart—that the European Union uses its influence to help restore the World Trade Organisation talks and to enable us to make progress.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: The hon. Lady scoffed at my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State when he talked about the need to create a new parliament in the WTO. She must recognise, however, that it is difficult for the WTO to make progress. It can easily become deadlocked simply because each of its 135 countries has a veto.

Mrs. Browning: Indeed, but we have heard that—for various reasons including the number of countries involved—what was expected to be the start of something is now in such disarray that we are unable to see a realistic timetable for finding solutions to the problems that impede progress. We shall expect the Government to provide such a timetable when they have had a little more time to reflect and have negotiated not just with the European Union, but with the Americans, whose role I shall consider shortly.

The Secretary of State was quite honest in saying that some initial preparations might not have been carried out in the lead-up to the talks and that that fact had contributed to their failure. However, it is extraordinary

that even during the talks there was a row among the members of the EU. That is just not acceptable. The Government claim to have influence and the superb negotiating skills that avoid rows and conflict with our European partners. They claim that they have the solutions to negotiations, agreements and conciliations within the EU.

In Seattle, we hear that there was a row in the EU over biotechnology. The Commissioner proposed a working group, despite opposition from 12 of the 15 member states. The proposal was sent to other countries, such as the Japanese and the Swiss, without UK Ministers and others seeing it. Earlier, the EU had opposed including biotechnology in the WTO remit. It said that it should be dealt with by the United Nations.

Why were such problems not sorted out before the representatives of the EU went to the talks? We understand that France felt so annoyed that it felt stitched up and threatened to walk out of the talks altogether. That may have influenced its attitude later in the week to other matters. It appears that lack of preparation and lack of communication in a matter in which we could have expected better of the Government have resulted in many unnecessary problems, thereby compounding the failure and the shambles of the talks that the Secretary of State attended.

I wish to refer to one policy area that will be on the agenda when the talks can be resumed. I hope that the Secretary of State will reflect on it when he and his colleagues make representations to the European Union. I am referring to agriculture. We noticed that the Government were reluctant to be strong in their negotiations with Europe about the reform of the common agricultural policy. The Agenda 2000 proposals that came out of earlier talks were watered down, particularly by the Prime Minister when he intervened on the matter. However, the objective of putting agriculture on the global agenda must be compatible with the EU's internal policies for reform of the common agricultural policy. That is essential. It is not acceptable to have one set of objectives internally, with restrictions and support through subsidies, but then to express the wish to get rid of more tariffs on a global basis.

What the Government say and what they do are incompatible. They say one thing, but they do another. Nowhere is that more evident than in the stance that they have taken in the EU on reform of the common agricultural policy and in the literature that sets out their objectives for agricultural reform on the global stage.

The Secretary of State and Labour Members have referred to other matters that have become entwined at the heart of the WTO agenda. They include environmental issues, as well as others dealing with child labour and costs. They are legitimate subjects for debate not only in the Chamber, but elsewhere. Such issues must be considered.

The Minister used a phrase that reflected a common-sense approach. He said that such matters should be dealt with in parallel, and I agree. When we criticise the fact that the talks have become enmeshed, one of the problems is that legitimate subjects have become bound up with the conditions for WTO progress. I would support the Secretary of State if issues such as child labour and the environment were to be developed outside the WTO, but in parallel with it. That would provide a read-across, but discussion of such issues would not inhibit progress on the reduction and removal of tariffs.

If the EU had the opportunity to make preparations to sort out problems before the talks began, so too might we have expected the Government to use their influence with the President of the United States and the representatives of the Democrats. The role of the Americans in the Seattle talks was significant for many reasons. I do not want to discuss the detail of the policing operation; I have no first-hand knowledge of that, but it sounded horrendous.

Does the Secretary of State think it appropriate that the person who chaired the meeting was the key negotiator for the United States of America? That is not common sense, and such problems could have been resolved before the talks began. As with the EU, we have heard from the Prime Minister about the special relationship and influence that he has with the President of the United States. If the Government have influence, surely they could have used it to sort that problem out. I hope that the Secretary of State will tell us exactly what action he will take in the EU and with the Americans to make sure that problems are sorted out before the talks resume.

I recognise that it is not always easy to second-guess what might happen. I see that the Minister for Trade is grateful for that, but some problems are glaringly obvious. Progress on this matter can be made now; we should not wait for another year. It is incumbent on our Government, who represent us at the talks, not just to leave matters to the EU negotiator and to circumstances outside their control, but to play a leading role.

I must tell the Secretary of State that we will support the Government if they have common-sense policies that will enable us to reduce the bundle of tariffs and help countries around the world, including developing countries, to remove the impediments on them so that they can play a full role in the global marketplace, which the Secretary of State has described very well. That progress will take place only if he makes it his personal responsibility to drive the matter forward.

Conservative Members will not find it acceptable if, after the debate, things are allowed to slip. The Secretary of State should give us a commitment in writing, perhaps in a White Paper, very soon, stating his proposals for action and his timetable, so that we have some hope.

Aside from the big issues of the talks, which have global importance, the Secretary of State will be aware that British companies are caught in the crossfire of unresolved business, particularly between the EU and the USA. I refer to certain categories of companies, of which I shall give examples rather than reading out a comprehensive list. The businesses affected are involved in the production of toiletries, handbags, folding decorative cartons, lithographs, bed linen and lead acid batteries. That is a diverse group, and a few more types of business are affected, but the list gives a flavour of the cross-section of British companies who, today, are having to make difficult decisions.

We have heard from many of those businesses. I raised their problems with the Minister for Trade in the European Scrutiny Committee a couple of weeks ago. They are caught in the banana war and in the hormone-treated beef war between the EU and the USA. Companies are relocating and laying off staff, and until those trade disputes are sorted out and read across into

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the progress of the WTO talks, they will continue to inflict real damage on British industry and British jobs. I hope that those companies will be given hope that they will not have to wait at least a year until the WTO talks can be resumed, and that the Secretary of State will make it his personal business to make progress.

Open markets are in the interests of all countries, whether developed or developing. The WTO talks have the potential to open up those marketplaces, remove the barriers and make a bonfire of all the tariffs, including not only our tariffs but those throughout the world. That can only be for the greater good of all citizens.

We shall not be picky or critical if the Secretary of States puts forward a detailed plan and some of it does not work. We shall be critical if he sits on his hands and allows events to unfold. We look to him for leadership. We look to the United Kingdom to show leadership in the European Union as well as in negotiations with the United States of America. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will come back to the House with better news the next time he speaks on the subject.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind the House that Madam Speaker has placed a 15-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, and that applies from now on.

3.23 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): This debate was arranged to celebrate another triumph for free trade, and it has turned out to be a long overdue—and, in my case, very welcome—debate about the real nature of global capitalism. It is from that point of view that I want to address the House.

Free trade and global capitalism are accepted almost unanimously among important people in Britain. Multinational companies demand free trade because it gives them freedom. The City needs it to prosper as a financial centre. Speculators depend on it. Most newspaper proprietors and editors are committed to it. The BBC is so devout about free trade that it broadcasts share values and currency values every hour, entirely replacing the daily prayer service. Teachers explain free trade in business study courses, and some trade union leaders believe that free trade is bound to come about.

All Front-Bench Members are utterly committed to global capitalism and free trade. Conservative Members, whether pro or anti the single currency, are utterly committed to capitalism. The Liberals, with their Gladstonian tradition and the Manchester school, are committed to capitalism. I say with the greatest respect that I have never heard a more powerful speech for world capitalism than that just made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who occupies an office that I once held.

Third way philosophers line up to support capitalism and free trade. Modernisers and focus groups yearn for more of it, and business-friendly Ministers think of nothing else. Labour Members had an important letter from four Department of Trade and Industry Ministers on 24 November, and the contents of that letter were reproduced in the Minister's speech.

The truth is that the benefits of capitalism and free trade are not really being seen in the world at all. We are told, for example, that the best way to narrow the gap between rich and poor is to have free trade and world capitalism. Ten years ago, the world had 147 dollar billionaires; five years ago, it had 274 dollar billionaires, and that number increased recently to 447, which is a rise of 25 per cent. Those billionaires have a combined wealth equivalent to the annual income of half of the world's population.

We must consider also what the World Health Organisation says about the health of the world. One fifth of the world's children live in poverty; one third of the world's children are under-nourished, and half of the world's population lack access to essential drugs. Each year, 12 million children under five die, and 95 per cent. of them die from poverty-related illness; more than half a million mothers die in childbirth, and more than 1 million babies die of tetanus. What contribution have globalisation and free trade made to solving those problems? The theory that wealth trickles down and that the richer Bill Gates gets, the richer people in Asia will get, is one of the most ludicrous illusions that could possibly be imagined.

What the Secretary of State did not say is that the one thing that globalisation has done is to make multinational companies more powerful than countries. That is why so many third world countries are worried. Fifty-one of the largest 100 economies in the world are now corporations: Mitsubishi's is bigger than that of Indonesia; General Motors's is bigger than that of Denmark; Ford's is bigger than that of South Africa, and Toyota's is bigger than that of Norway. The sales of the top 200 corporations are greater than one quarter of the world's economic activity.

Multinational corporations want free trade because they are trying to get Governments off their back so that they can exploit the profits that they can make with the minimum of interference. They think that global capitalism and free trade will end redistributive taxation and, although this has not been mentioned so far, gradually turn health and education into market-related activities.

A restricted paper circulated to World Trade Organisation delegates was brought to my attention by one of the Members of the European Parliament who received it. It asked:

"How can WTO members ensure that ongoing reforms in national health systems are mutually supportive and whenever relevant market-based?"

It will not be long before some countries can say to others, "You are discriminating against us because you have a health service and our workers have not, so you must cut back your health service so that you are not taking unfair advantage."

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): There are many myths about the WTO, partly because the negotiations are so complicated that people can make up anything that they like. There is an agreement on trade in services. Some developing countries need banking and other financial services to get their economies going, but the agreement

says that each country will open whatever sectors it wants to the market, and there is no compulsion for it to open any sector that it does not want to open.

Mr. Benn: There may be no compulsion, but the WTO would like health to be market-related.

Clare Short: No, that is not true.

Mr. Benn: Well, it said so in the document, and my right hon. Friend must have seen it.

This is a debate marking the end of the millennium, and I do not want to get into a party argument at all; I want to try to understand what is happening. Not long ago, Richard Whelan from the Institute of Economic Affairs said:

"Africa should be privatised and leases to run individual countries auctioned off".

That is serious. In the *Financial Times*, James Morgan, the BBC economics correspondent, said:

"If some countries, especially in Africa, were to be run along the lines of commercial enterprises rather than states, investors might find them much more attractive".

That is what the multinational companies are thinking about.

When the Secretary of State drew a comparison with the Luddites, he reminded me of the leading article in *The Economist* on 26 February 1848—a year or two before I entered the House—in which the slave trade was discussed. The article said:

"If in place of entering into Treaties for the suppression of the Slave Trade, we made conventions to ameliorate the conditions of the existing race of slaves—to establish and regulate on unquestionable principles the free emigration of Africans . . . we might, with a tenth of the cost, do a great substantial good to the African Race".

I can imagine Ofslave being set up, with Chris Woodhead in charge, naming and shaming the captains of slave ships on which the sanitary arrangements for slaves are inadequate. For God's sake, surely we must take some account in this debate of the worry of the enormous number of people in the world who have not got rich through free trade.

Global capitalism empowers companies to move money freely, but it does not allow workers to move freely. If someone owns a factory in London but the wages are so high that he cannot make a profit, he can close it and open it in Malaysia, where wages are lower. If, however, someone from Malaysia tries to come to London where wages are higher, immigration laws would keep him out.

Globalisation has nothing to do with internationalism. At least in the European Union there is a free movement of capital and labour. We are not talking about letting workers move in search of higher wages, but only of companies moving in search of higher profits. Global capitalism allows big business to run the banana republics. It involves risks to the protection of the environment, and we are told that it is inevitable.

We have had free trade in Britain for a long time, but it has not solved the problems of poverty automatically. There was terrible poverty in Dickensian Britain and, even today, the gap between rich and poor is wider, even though Yorkshire cannot impose bans or tariffs on goods from Derbyshire. It is time that we looked at how free trade is a complete illusion.

Let us look at the matter from another point of view that is all the more important. Global capital is eroding political democracy. Power has already been transferred to Eddie George. I do not know which constituency he won at the election; I could not find his name anywhere on the list. None the less, he has more power than the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The European central bank will have more power than either of them.

None of the representatives of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the WTO is elected. Who elects the Secretary-General of NATO and the director-general of the WTO? Nobody. Our political democracy has been decapitated in the interests of worship of money. As Keir Hardie said at the beginning of the century, we must choose between worshipping God or mammon, and there is no doubt on which we decided.

That brings me to another matter. People outside the House know that there is a massive coalition in this Parliament in favour of capitalism, and they are therefore becoming cynical and disillusioned with the political process. One of the reasons why people do not vote is that they think that there is one view inside the House—that all the leaders are huddling together in coalitions and patriotic alliances—and that they are excluded from it. That is of course what happened in Seattle.

The Minister who made that point clear is now the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He said in Bonn on 3 March last year:

"It may be that the era of pure representative democracy is coming slowly to an end".

That was a more candid account of what is happening than the praise of trade in this debate.

The Prime Minister, if I may quote him with approval, said when Leader of the Opposition during a debate on the Halifax summit in June 1995:

"is not the central issue the revolution in the globalisation of the financial and currency markets, which now wield massive speculative power over the Governments of all countries and have the capacity seriously to disrupt economic progress?"—[*Official Report*, 19 June 1995; Vol. 262, c. 23-4.]

That idea inspired many of the people who went to Seattle. The churches were there, many concerned about world poverty, there were environmentalists, animal welfare groups, trade unionists and those who campaign for the cancellation of third world debt. All were immediately denounced as anarchists, extremists, members of the mob, and so on. The police in Seattle put up a pretty good show of organising a Tiananmen square operation without the killings. When I saw the police in their Star Wars outfits and the arrest of 500 people who wanted only justice for their own people, it gave me an indication of what it is all about.

The internet plays a very important part in these matters because, through it, all the groups sent out their messages. They could not get their messages across through Rupert Murdoch, CNN or the BBC, but they could communicate directly. They have no leaders to be demonised by the press; groups turned up with their own faith.

In the next century, people want co-operation and not competition in self-sustaining economies, working with other nations. They want security in their lives—and that does not mean more nuclear weapons. They want to plan for peace as we have always planned for war, with a single-minded determination to meet our needs. They want democratic control over their own destiny. That is the real lesson that this century must teach the next one.

[Mr. Benn]

I shall finish with a quote that, in a way, sums up what I feel on this issue.

"We have lived so long at the mercy of uncontrolled economic forces that we have become sceptical about any plan for human emancipation. Such a rational and deliberate reorganisation of our economic life would enable us, out of the increased wealth production, to establish an irreducible minimum standard which might progressively be raised to one of comfort and security".

Those are the words of Harold Macmillan in his book "The Middle Way". I sat in Parliament with that man—the great grandfather of the wets, who was well to the left of the present Government.

If as a democrat, an internationalist and a committed socialist I may endorse that view, I suspect that I would be doing so with the support of most people in the world, who do not benefit from the worship of money that we have been celebrating in this strange religious festival that we call a debate.

3.37 pm

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): It is a great pleasure for the House to hear a voice from the past. From the fascinating speech of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), we understand how far we have moved in trying to face up to the fundamental question to which Harold Macmillan was addressing himself: how, in a global economy, do we implement mechanisms to ensure that the world works for the benefit of all rather than merely for those who are strong enough to impose themselves on it?

The World Trade Organisation ought to be such a mechanism. Indeed, it has been a failure of it that we have not ensured on a global scale the introduction of standards and attitudes that we at home have already sought to introduce. That is very hard to achieve; we cannot expect to achieve it quickly, but it is essential. Globalisation is not something to be proved or disproved; it is to be accepted as a fact. Then, we must decide how we try to turn it to the advantage of all.

I ought to declare an interest. As chairman of the Marine Stewardship Council, I felt it right to ensure that those of us who are concerned with sustainable development and the proper labelling of goods, so that people may make a choice, were heard in the WTO discussions. There was the opportunity to create the mechanism through which such global control could be partly achieved.

I thank the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry not only for what he had to say, but for the courtesy that he and his team of Ministers extended to the non-governmental organisations and others who were in Seattle. We were very well briefed and able at all times to make the points that we wanted to put. That does not mean that I always agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Indeed, on a number of issues, I do not. However, such openness might be contrasted with the WTO itself.

The first thing that we must establish in the WTO is a degree of openness and transparency. For example, it is not acceptable that a world organisation should make decisions affecting people's livelihoods and deal with appeals, without any knowledge of the relevant facts and papers. That is a closed, secret system. It ought to be an open system, so that we all know where we are.

Secondly, it is not acceptable that democratically elected Parliaments should not have a voice in such an organisation. I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) did not welcome, as I hope she will in the future, the proposition that comes not from the Government, but from the Opposition originally, that there should be some means for the Parliaments of the member nations to express their views, as is the case in the Western European Union and other organisations. My hon. Friend said that she would examine the details with care, and I am sure that she will. When she does, she will see how valuable that could be. It is part of the openness that we need.

A world organisation should listen to the views of all the countries that are involved. When I represented the European Union as the chairman of the Agriculture Council at the WTO meeting in the Uruguay round, it became clear to me that decisions were made between two organisations—the United States and the European Union. Thank goodness we are a member of the EU, or we would not have that important role to play. Outside the EU, we would have the same role as all the other countries, which would be much less important than our role as a key constituent of one of the two principal negotiating organisations.

The reason is not that that has been ordained, or that it is considered the best way. It is because the two strongest trading organisations in the world are the European Union and the United States. I do not think much of the fact that the US internal elections are so important to the WTO, but that is a fact of life. Unless we make the EU strong enough to counterbalance the US, or to support the US when that is the right course, no meaningful negotiation will be possible in the WTO.

One of our problems is that we have not been prepared to recognise the only means of achieving the balance necessary to ensure that the most powerful nation in the world should not insist that the chairman of the WTO should also be its chief negotiator. Who could stop that happening? It is a disgrace, but because of that power, such decisions go unquestioned.

It is important for us to recognise that if the WTO is to be legitimate, it must be transparent, and if it is to be transparent, the poorest nations of the world must have their say. We have our say. Sometimes we do not do so as effectively as we should, but we have the opportunity. The poorest nations do not have the money to back up their views with research and the day to day opportunity to lobby that is available in Geneva.

A representative working in a back office with a half-working telephone and an old duplicating machine is in no position to put the same pressure on the WTO as the representatives of the rich countries can. We therefore support the Government's view that we should extend the opportunities given to poorer countries by the WTO. It must enable countries to play a proper part in an organisation that affects their future to such an extent.

It is essential for the WTO to recognise legitimate concerns about the way in which trade is conducted, which do not relate solely to trade. Those concerns are so closely linked to trade that they cannot be separated, but they cannot be summed up simply by demanding free trade. I have always been a supporter of free trade and I continue to fight for it; no hon. Member could suggest otherwise. That does not mean that democratically elected

Governments, and groups of Governments, as in the EU, do not have the right to concern themselves with matters such as hormones in beef and genetically modified foods. Those are real issues, and we must find proper forums in which they can be ventilated.

It was quite inappropriate for the US to demand that the issue of GM foods should be discussed in the WTO. It was the US which, with four, and only four, allies, destroyed the biosafety meeting at Cartagena. Such a use of international muscle was wholly inappropriate. We must insist that those issues are discussed and decided in the forums designed for them, and not hijacked into the WTO.

The WTO must therefore accept that there is a parity of respect—a point that I tried to make to the right hon. Member for Chesterfield—for international decisions made at the biodiversity convention, the biosafety convention, the conference on sustainable development, the issues that we decide following Kyoto or Montreal, and all the development decisions that have been internationally accepted.

We should also respect the decisions of the International Labour Organisation on some of those issues, about which people rightly feel strongly. The attempt to make the WTO the sole arbiter was what brought people out on to the streets. I should tell the right hon. Member for Chesterfield that I witnessed those protests, initially from among those who were protesting and later, when the teargas and so on were used, from a vantage point that enabled me to see everything.

The policing was not wicked; it was totally incompetent. The police tried to stop the protesters getting into the conference hall, but that is not what the protesters were trying to do. They wanted to stop the delegates getting into the conference hall, so the protesters joined the police on their barricades to make sure that the exclusion was democratically universal, rather than partial. It was bad policing, badly carried out, and did not set a good example to the rest of the world, but it was not malicious.

Those who were on the streets were in large measure trying to make a reasonable point—in the wrong way, but a reasonable point none the less: that they did not believe that free trade is the only good. For most of us, it is a good, but it is not the only good. We all need a market economy, but none of us can be content with a market society. There is more to life than mere free trade, but free trade is the means whereby those who have limited lives can be given richer lives. The WTO must provide the terms for that to be achieved.

We should recognise what an enormous restriction on our sovereignty the WTO is. The right hon. Member for Chesterfield is right about that. I sometimes find it difficult to understand some of my colleagues, who are worried about the restrictions placed on them in the EU, where they can ensure that things are done properly, whereas we have given to the WTO powers that no democratic Government have ever given up in the past—the powers of controlling excise duties and the like, the way in which trade operates and so on—which we do happily because we see the benefit, just as we should see the benefit in the EU.

Clare Short: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. Is it not the case that because of the speed with which capital moves round the world and the technology that goes with it, we cannot manage matters only at the national level? We must pool our sovereignty in international systems in order to exercise any sovereignty. The world is not giving it over to the WTO; without an international system, we could not manage the rules of international trade.

Mr. Gummer: The Secretary of State is absolutely right. We gain sovereignty by doing that. If we do not do that, we have no control over world capital flows, the way in which speculators affect currency or multinationals, which are larger and more powerful than many countries. The right hon. Member for Chesterfield proposes that we should give up all control over such matters and let those forces ride roughshod over us. We propose—and there is some synergy across the Chamber—a global society that is capable of drawing up the rules whereby those powerful forces can operate. The European Union does that in a regional way. For example, we acknowledge that we cannot deal with fishing on a national basis because fish do not have flags on their backsides. They swim around and need to be dealt with on a European level. Similarly, we cannot tackle the environment nationally when half our pollution comes from Europe and we export half the pollution that we produce to the rest of Europe.

We support a mechanism whereby we in the EU are sufficiently powerful to provide a counter-balance—and, good Lord, we have seen that that is necessary over the past few months—to our friends and allies in the United States, and to create the conditions for globalisation to become a benefit and not an incubus. The trouble with the argument of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield is that he opts out; everything is so terrible, unacceptable and impossible that he wants it to go on while he simply bemoans it. Luddites through the ages have done that. Their philosophy is, "Let's stop the world, we want to get off."

We need to control the forces that I have described. We will not do that unless we play an active part in the EU and unless it plays a proper part in the WTO.

3.52 pm

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): It is a sign of how far this place has progressed that I agree with so many of the remarks of the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer). He mentioned the mechanisms that are needed to make progress. They constitute perhaps one of our greatest challenges as we move towards the millennium.

There is currently a debate in Westminster Hall about modernising government. I was torn between attending that and attending the debate in the Chamber because, unless we can modernise government and create effective participation at every level of civil society and at every parliamentary level—not only ministerial level—on an issue that affects our planet, we shall not make the necessary progress towards making free trade fair trade, which is underpinned by environmental sustainability. If I convey only one lesson in the short time that I have to speak, that one is the most important.

We cannot simply consider what we need to do about free trade; we must link it to environmental sustainability. Our parliamentary institutions and our mechanisms for achieving that are outdated. I am a member of the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, which, like other

[Ms Joan Walley]

Select Committees, has examined some of the issues that were raised in the millennium round in Seattle. From the evidence that we took in the short time available, it was clear that there is not enough transparency and openness. Nobody has worked out a means of linking free trade with multilateral environment agreements. The question is no longer whether, but how we make progress.

I regret that I was not in Seattle and that many people who would have liked to contribute initially to the debate through parliamentary discussion could not do that. We need to re-examine the opportunities for debate on such issues in the Chamber. We were promised a debate before the meeting in Seattle, and I regret that it did not take place. If Select Committees could have had an input into that debate, our constituents, who feel disfranchised and disengaged from events, could at least believe that our parliamentary scrutiny was making a difference to important, highly technical and complex issues. Those issues include considering the means of underpinning matters with the precautionary principle and re-examining labour standards. They are crucial matters to which we do not pay proper attention.

Let us consider transparency. Ministers negotiate on our behalf, but because of the Ponsonby rules, we do not have an opportunity for real participation in drawing up the bottom line of the negotiations. Whatever the outcome of the agenda for modernising the House, we must consider the way in which the Government, through their role in the EU and the global governance of our planet, can examine the crucial new international architecture more closely.

I know that many other hon. Members wish to speak, but I want to conclude by commenting on environmental sustainability and the way in which all the evidence before the Select Committee highlighted the fraught and flawed nature of the relationship between the WTO and the multilateral environment agreements. There is no common basis for ensuring that the precautionary principle is at the root of everything. Like me, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State believes that it is important for developing countries to participate increasingly in trade. However, there is no point in trade if it means that, in the short term, we destroy biodiversity and the earth's resources and prevent sustained trade. We must work to underpin all trade with environmental sustainability. We do not currently have the means to achieve that, and we need to be radical, innovative and imaginative in the new institutional and architectural framework for the next millennium.

If our short debate can be a means of getting all the necessary partners—national and international—round the table, beginning to work through the complex procedure of simply deciding how we can put what needs to be discussed on the table, and understanding and slowly working through the contradictions, it will have achieved something, and held out some hope for the sort of policies that we support for the next millennium.

3.58 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) announced that I would speak in the Gladstonian free trade tradition. I shall try to live up to that. First, I must apologise for having to slip out later to move amendments in Committee. I hope that that is not viewed as a discourtesy.

My points of departure from the right hon. Gentleman in many ways echo the Secretary of State's excellent statement. First, I support an open, liberal trading system, not as an abstract, ideological belief but because history shows that it is crucial to raising ordinary people's living standards, and especially those of people who live in poor countries. At the risk of embarrassing the Secretary of State, I want to praise her work. She has taken a lot of flak from some of the development lobbies, which have adopted a fashionable new protectionism. She has argued courageously that open markets benefit developing countries. She may have lost a few friends on the fringes of non-governmental organisations, but she has probably gained others in the developing world and elsewhere.

I want to emphasise the importance of the WTO, not only as free trading organisation—it is only partly that—but as an organisation that creates rules and upholds the rule of law. That is absolutely central and, within the rule of law, it often offers the weak their only protection from the strong.

Some of the key WTO decisions of the 1990s enraged some people in the United States because, for the first time, it found its unilateral actions being overturned by a judicial framework. Examples are Venezuelan gasoline, Mexican shrimps and the slightly comical case of Costa Rican underpants and in each, whatever the rights and wrongs of the deliberations—I have no way of judging them—the United States was talked down by a legal panel of representatives of many countries in the international community. Surely that is progress.

The key point, which leaves us all hanging in respect of the radical statements made by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield, concerns the alternative. The trouble is that nationalism and unilateral action of the worst possible kind are unleashed when such a system breaks down, and there are many historical precedents for that.

Today, we have been talking about the beef ban and the reactions to it. The two countries involved trade a lot and have a framework for settling disputes politically and legally, but the nationalism aroused in both countries by the ban points to the crucial need for an international framework for resolving such disagreements.

I return to what went wrong in Seattle. There has already been some analysis of that, but a finger has to be pointed at the United States. I am not talking simply about the procedural points and the lack of preparation; the demagogic statements of President Clinton and the idea of telling the developing countries that they will face sanctions for being poor were so damaging. I am sure that he made those statements for totally opportunistic reasons, but they were thoughtless and damaging. There are people in this country—they sit on the Benches alongside me—who argue that we should detach ourselves from the European Union to be closer to the United States, even to the extent of joining the North American Free Trade Agreement, but people often fail to understand that the United States, far from being the paragon of free-trading virtue, contains extreme isolationist and protectionist tendencies, on the left and the right. That is the kind of structure within which we would be moving.

The case for a new round of liberalisation was not properly made and, although we may find scapegoats for what went wrong, we are all to blame in a sense, as are all Governments. There was hardly any discussion of the round in the House, although its opponents were

mobilising through the internet and their organisations, and hardly anybody made any attempt to explain its importance.

Last week, I asked in a parliamentary question whether the Government had made any estimate of the benefit to the average British family of the new round of trade liberalisation. I received the helpful answer that studies had been done and it was estimated that the benefit for the ordinary family could be roughly £4 to £5 a week, mainly from the liberalisation of agriculture. That is far more than such a family is likely to get back from the Chancellor in tax cuts; it would receive a tangible benefit if trade liberalisation could be made to work, but, although I am not pointing fingers, none of us has argued that case effectively.

Another comment has to be made about the Seattle round. Many of the NGOs that I have dealt with over the past few months—some of which have been forceful and articulate in putting their case—played a constructive role, raising valid questions about transparency, the environment and the exclusion of developing countries. Some, however, are deeply hostile to the globalisation concept and they went to Seattle to wreck the round. The people who were dancing in the streets at its end will, I am afraid, harvest a bitter fruit and we can already see some of the consequences of the breakdown of the negotiations. One is that the isolationist tendencies in the United States—which are led by people from evil forces on the far right such as Pat Buchanan, who was in Seattle egging on the demonstrators—will get a lease of life and a new form of legitimacy.

Another result of the protest and the breakdown of the talks is the new respectability that has been given to people who argue about the dangers of cheap labour and the link between trade and labour standards. The Secretary of State dealt with that well and I do not need to go over the arguments again, but we underestimate at our peril the extent of the prejudices associated with that issue—they run deep.

The right hon. Member for Chesterfield is not here, but he knows his political history. At the end of the 17th century, there were riots on the streets of London and workers smashed windows in Whitehall because they feared what was then regarded as coolie labour and early Indian textile products such as calico. Such prejudice has long been present. At the end of the 19th century, the Conservatives had one of their bouts of nationalism and Joseph Chamberlain almost came to power on a platform of protectionism and keeping out cheap labour products. Oswald Mosley adopted such policies in the 1930s. Protectionism is a powerful current in the United States and in France, where it has been taken up by the National Front.

A danger of the breakdown is that a new lease of life has been given to people who believe that importing products from poor countries with lower wages is fundamentally damaging and morally and ethically wrong. A final danger has not been touched on, although we need to watch it carefully. People from the establishment in Europe and the United States will resurrect the concept of the transatlantic partnership and say, "Let's have more trade liberalisation, but we don't want all these troublesome developing countries to be involved. They are getting in the way and creating problems. Let's get together with the Americans and hammer out a deal on electronic commerce, agriculture and a few tariffs and that will be it." We must be aware of that danger.

How can we turn things round and what positive issues can be taken forward? I welcome what the Secretary of State said about process and I emphasise a point that was touched on by the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer): transparency is partly to do with introducing democratic control. A Parliament for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation already exists and he mentioned a Parliament for the WTO, which is an important idea. We should not simply introduce non-elected NGOs to the structure; elected people should be scrutinising it. The other process change has to be the recognition of developing countries as a legitimate force in the WTO—they have been shockingly marginalised and excluded—although in some of the proposals we are in danger of re-inventing the wheel.

I have been involved in the preparatory process of the past two rounds of negotiations and it was said on each occasion, "Let's pay much more attention to developing countries." The United Nations conference on trade and development and the Commonwealth Secretariat in particular did a great deal in that regard, but the issue is not simply being polite to lots of ambassadors and encouraging them to sit in meetings. Real political courage is involved in doing what those countries want—cutting tariffs and quotas, often on sensitive items.

I referred to textiles and clothing in an intervention and if people are serious about helping the lowest-income countries such as Bangladesh, we must phase out quotas on garments more rapidly and cut tariffs on footwear and textile products. Although that is politically difficult—it would be foolish to say to our constituents that it should be done overnight—we have to tackle those issues if we are serious about helping developing countries.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) touched on the other issue for the future—how we integrate environment issues into trade—and I also want to discuss it. It is easy to use jargon and we can all say that trade rounds should be about sustainability; I am fully paid up to that idea, but what does it mean? The reconciliation of multilateral environment agreements with WTO rules is a practical problem, but it is vital and must be done. What would happen in practice if 40 mainly developed countries signed up for an international treaty—the Montreal protocol, for example, or a future treaty on climate change—and large numbers of developing countries, and China and India in particular, refused to sign? What would happen if sanctions were legitimised under the WTO? What quorum would have to be achieved before a multilateral environment agreement would be enforceable? That is the practical issue that has to be raised in respect of the environment. Another environmental issue is that if environmental pollution is not trans-boundary and it involves a company knocking down its tropical forests in an unsustainable way, who will say that it is right for other countries to impose sanctions against the offending country? It may be that it is the product of profiteering.

Clare Short: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman says, but surely we need mutual recognition of multilateral agreements and WTO rules. We should not use the WTO to enforce environmental agreements.

[Clare Short]

We must have stronger enforcement systems within environmental agreements; otherwise we will get into terrible trouble.

Dr. Cable: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right. That is the way forward. There must be stronger recognition of multilateral environment agreements. However, there are hard questions to be faced. For example, if there is incompatibility, at what point can trade measures, which exist in the Montreal protocol, legitimately be raised? I raise the matter as a question and I do not have an answer. However, like the right hon. Lady, I recognise that it is a crucial issue. We must return to our constituencies and justify and support the WTO on the basis that it can uphold global and environmental agreements.

I began to touch on the other environmental question, which is what happens if a country is pursuing an environmental process that is unsustainable. That touches on the wider issue of ethics, which several hon. Members have mentioned. We all have ethical standards. Many of our constituents want to buy goods that are made in an environmentally friendly way and feel passionately about that. They want to ensure that ethical standards are applied and that the product does not incorporate genetically modified foods, for example.

We are trying to resolve two principles, and it is difficult to do so. One element is freedom of choice, in which we all believe. The customer must be free to choose what he or she wants to buy. That often involves an ethical dimension. Another element is that we do not want to see protectionism. How will the two principles be reconciled? One approach is labelling and another is that it may be necessary in some cases to introduce trade restrictions. That is a legitimate expression of a society's ethics. The way to deal with the matter is by means of compensation, either in cash or by allowing trade access in other areas, so that in no circumstances can there be an excuse for trade measures.

We are at a dangerous time. There is a real danger that the system will unravel and that all sorts of unhealthy, primeval nationalistic forces could emerge. The one source of encouragement that I derive is that we have been here before. The early 1990s saw a virtual breakdown of the Uruguay round. However, it was patched up. I think that the forces of common sense and internationalism will prevail, but we are at a dangerous time.

4.12

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): The recent events in Seattle, although the violence was regrettable, had the virtue of focusing international attention on the activities of the World Trade Organisation.

It is important to understand that the supposed glories and benefits of free trade and the virtues of the WTO are seen in a different light by those who live in one of the third world developing countries which have been on the receiving end of globalisation and free trade.

It is worth reminding the House of the trade developments that we have seen in the past 10 or 20 years. Although we have seen a forward movement towards greater liberalisation and more free trade, the developments have not been to the benefit of many of the poorest people in the world. Although trade flows have tripled in recent years, the 48 poorest countries have seen their share of exports decline by half. Generally, the tariffs on their products, which they try to export into industrialised countries, remain high. Although we are all in favour of free trade, the process looks rather different in the third world. It looks rather different in the developing countries. The benign influence of the WTO looks very different from our view of it in the eyes of a country that does not have political muscle and cannot afford a flotilla of expensive lawyers and advisers. That is the position of a country that has come out on the bad end of some WTO decisions.

I shall detain the House by speaking for a few minutes about bananas. The interesting feature is that the issue illustrates all that is wrong with the WTO in the eyes of the developing world. We have heard much about globalisation and how the forward march of free trade cannot be opposed. We have heard also about the benign influence of the WTO and how it will make everyone richer. Even my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development was saying that free trade is to the benefit of third world countries. Tell that to the eastern Caribbean. Tell that to poor rural producers of bananas.

Over the past 12 months, America has taken a case to the WTO to try to dismantle the special protection which ACP bananas, largely Caribbean bananas, get in European markets. The House may ask, what is wrong with that? What is wrong with America demanding a level playing field? I remind the House that America does not grow any bananas. We all know why America took the case to the WTO. It did so because big American multinationals such as Chiquita have made lavish donations to both Democrat and Republican politicians. Fuelled by that campaign money, and paying off political debts, American negotiators took a case to the WTO that was designed to smash the preferential access that Caribbean banana producers are now given by the European Union market.

Caribbean countries and the ACP are being asked to compete in open markets with multinational producers in south America such as Chiquita, which run plantation-type operations. They pay their workers little or nothing. They contribute nothing to the environment of the community. Small, rural and often family-owned banana producers are being asked to compete with such companies. They cannot do so. Their banana production does not have the economies of scale of the south American plantations. Those involved in the family-run smaller units try to pay themselves a living wage. They do not benefit from a system which enables the big south American producers to pay very low wages. They cannot compete in completely open markets. Up to 90 per cent. of the foreign exchange of some Caribbean countries—for example, Dominica and St. Lucia—is dependent on banana production, when their trade collapses as it will do if the Americans and the WTO get their way, what will the producers do?

I have heard some of my Government Front-Bench colleagues say that they should diversify. Much of the discussion until now about the WTO and free trade has been at the level of theory. I am talking about people's lives and what free trade means to those people. What will banana producers in Dominica, St. Lucia and even Jamaica, although it will not be the country worst affected

by a collapse in trade, do? How will they diversify? Will they move into computer programming? Will banana producers in Portland, Jamaica or rural parts of St. Lucia diversify in that direction? No. They will diversify into the only other major agriculture cash crop in the Caribbean and south America, and that is drugs.

When politicians and commentators talk about the merits of free trade, they need to work things through to understand what it means in some peoples lives. Many banana producers in the eastern Caribbean are already being forced out of business. In December 1997 the Select Committee on International Development put these issues to Mr. Eglin, the WTO's director of development, he said:

"The WTO is there to run a set of rules that essentially open markets."

He added:

"And then the markets do what the markets do."

The markets in the eastern Caribbean and in other banana regions are forcing thousands of people into destitution and poverty. These are people who do not want to be dependent on handouts, charity or goodwill. They simply want to grow their bananas, sell them, make a living, send their children to school and lead a genuinely independent life.

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I would not normally stop someone from intervening, but, with respect, I have only a limited amount of time.

The WTO sees itself as operating a neutral system that allows markets to do what markets do. In the specific instance of banana producers in the Caribbean and in many other instances, which I am sure other hon. Members could cite, markets are forcing poor people to ruination.

It does not seem to matter to the WTO that Caribbean countries that are having such a dreadful time because of the threat to their banana industries are, in other respects, examples of the good governance and stable democracy of which we are supposed be in favour. It does not seem to matter that 90 per cent. of their foreign exchange earnings depend on that crop. America has come calling, backed by big multinational money and everything is subservient to that. That is why so many people are angry with the WTO. That is why so many people in the third world are worried about the forward march of globalisation and free trade.

Like a mantra, Ministers, the Opposition and the Liberal Democrat spokesman talk about the glories of free trade. What I want to know is: if free trade is so good, why do not Germany, Japan and America go in for more of it? It is a bit like hard work. One of the mantras of new Labour is that everyone should go out to work. I am an old-fashioned socialist, as the House knows. I always say: if work is so wonderful, why do not rich people do more of it? We cannot for a minute have free trade in exporting rice to Japan. Through all manner of means, the Japanese have protected their rice industry and the communities that depend on it.

As for freely exporting agricultural produce to America and Europe, one of the worst things about the free trade regime that we are asked to applaud this afternoon is that the domestic agricultural industries of small third world countries are forced into ruin because of competition from some of the most heavily subsidised agricultural industries in the world: those in the European Union and America. How dare American and European politicians lecture the world on free trade when their agriculture is so heavily subsidised?

Of course free trade is important. Of course, the WTO's role of setting the rules and attempting to have a level playing field is important, but let us not forget that the world operates at the level not just of abstraction and theory, but of real people and their lives. If the House could talk to some of the poor rural people in the Caribbean to whom I have talked about how they see the WTO's activities, we would not hear the unthinking praise of free trade that we have.

Something can be gained from the collapse of the Seattle round. All sides should come to the table genuinely to ensure that the WTO empowers poorer and developing countries, to bring transparency to its activities and, above all, to find a way and framework in which the issues of poverty reduction, development and genuine equality in the world order can be brought to bear in the sterile workings of the WTO.

4.24 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Those who argue against the virtues of free trade should consider the opposite, which has been tried for a long period and has demonstrably not worked. I happen to be the director of an organisation that seeks to help countries that were within the Soviet orbit and are now democracies to build capacity, democratic institutions, a neutral police force and a neutral civil service. One of the things that they all seek to do is join the World Trade Organisation to establish free trade because they see it as a buttress of the democratic process. The creation of open markets is seen as part and parcel of that process.

Therefore, in talking about free trade, let us not think that we are talking merely about something that represents the self-interest of multinational corporations and that it is remote from the way people lead their lives. There is a close link between being able to choose what we buy and being able to choose whom we vote for. We should keep those two things closely in correlation.

It has been an interesting debate. The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) talked about the problems of the global economy and multinationals and then praised the protesters. Of course, the protesters were brought together by the exploitation of the industry that perhaps represents global technology at its most efficient: the internet and e-mail. We should call it the Microsoft soft round if we were to acknowledge the role that Mr. Bill Gates is likely to play in the final outcome. Here is a global industry that has empowered the individual. The individual with a computer and a terminal has never been so powerful, able as he is to participate so effectively in world affairs. Global business is being matched by the global lobby, so the balance is maintained but in a different dimension.

I still think that the argument for free trade is overwhelming because it has been the motor of economic growth since the war. The growth in trade has run ahead of the growth of the economies of all participating members. It is a moral as well as a material argument. Cutting trade barriers is cutting taxes cut for every citizen.

[Mr. David Curry]

The WTO is obviously the victim of its own success. It is being asked to deal with problems that are not its to deal with; they are the business of other bodies. That is not to say that we should not recognise those other concerns. The argument is not about whether they are legitimate, but about the correct way in which to progress those concerns. What is the mechanism that works without destroying what we have already?

A trade body cannot deal and should not be asked to deal with labour conditions. It should not be asked to deal with the environment. If we are going to tackle those issues—frankly, the WTO neither creates nor solves environmental problems—we need effective international bodies. The WTO should be the model for those bodies, not the model to be demolished.

We have to recognise—as the Secretary of State for International Development and my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) have said—that issues are interrelated. For example, the great Kyoto negotiations took place some years ago. I have a strong suspicion that my right hon. Friend was at those as well. He appears to have a particular entrée to such negotiations. It is a particular predilection, but it is one that he has so I can understand his wishing to pursue it.

The Kyoto agreement has not yet been ratified. It would be absurd to seek an agreement on a new world trade round that made it impossible to implement the Kyoto agreement. That is what we mean by the establishment of relationships between separate processes, but it is important that Government should attribute the same importance to those different processes, so that they are not seen to regard one as mandatory and another as discretionary.

Again, the concerns about labour market conditions and the environment are important, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal has said, labelling, which gives the consumer a choice, is one of the ways in which to deal with those concerns. If developing countries are not satisfied with what we have at the moment, they will need a new round as well. If they like what we have at the moment, that is fine. If the exploitation that the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) talked about really is a problem, surely that will indicate the urgency of a new world trade round, not that we should withdraw from the structure that seeks to create a framework of regulation.

Let us remember that Europe has proposed duty-free entry for industrial goods from the least developed countries in the face of hostility from the United States. It has to be repeated: the choice is not between global capitalism and a village economy that is based on three acres and a cow; the choice is between the existence of an international trade framework and the non-existence of such a framework, whereby the richest and most powerful world corporations will be even more powerful than they are now.

It is the job of politicians to try to promote globalisation upwards so that if business is globalising, we develop political frameworks that are capable of operating at the multinational level. We should seek also to push down to people political democratic responsibility so that they are able to deal with their own affairs. Globalisation is one phenomenon of the modern world, but atomisation—pushing down responsibility to, for example, a school board or to a community group, perhaps to administer a regeneration programme—is another, complementary one.

At Seattle, the real crisis was provoked by the inexcusable behaviour of the United States in insisting not only on provisions on labour conditions, but on conditions backed by trade sanctions. It is worth remembering that it was the United States that called for the new round, that designated Seattle and that decided on the high-profile presidential launch. If the United States decided that the interests of protectionist trade unions mattered more than other considerations, it might have been better if it had made that choice earlier. We have been there before, and we know the destructiveness of such demands.

Three years ago, at the previous WTO ministerial meeting, in Singapore, we heard exactly the same row, over exactly the same issue, and it took five days to resolve. It was resolved only because a group of developed and developing countries—including India and Pakistan, with South Africa acting as go-between—managed to construct a compromise that dropped the demand for trade sanctions to back rules on labour market behaviour.

President Clinton has dropped the demand, which itself was another example of destructive high-level bombing with inadequate identification of the target. It is difficult to appreciate the logic in, for example, negotiating with China on WTO entry but saying that sanctions to back labour market regulation are an indispensable United States demand. The statements are incompatible and are simply an invitation to Congress to refuse to ratify Chinese WTO membership. It is a regrettable incoherence in the American position.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) mentioned agriculture. Agriculture is not merely the dog that did not bark in the negotiations; it is the dog that does not need to bark in such negotiations. The future of agricultural reform was prescribed in the Uruguay round of negotiations—not only the direction of agricultural reform but the reform timetable has been prescribed in those negotiations.

The matters that the Government agreed at the most recent round on common agricultural policy reforms were more academic than important. However badly the Prime Minister behaves, the European Union is locked into those negotiations and has no option but to reform. The European Union knows that if it wants to participate in world food markets, the time is limited in which it may do so with the aid of subsidy. Reform is an inescapable part of those negotiations, which have already been signed and sealed, and does not depend on the Seattle process to continue.

In earlier negotiations President Reagan made the same extreme demands, which were dealt with. President Clinton is now repeating the demands, although it is perhaps worth noticing that, for the past few years, he has been hurling money at American farmers in response to some of the crises in American agriculture.

We therefore have the familiar ritual between the Europeans and Americans. To avoid too much focus on agriculture, the European Union tables lots of other demands, which are meritorious in their own right, as a form of electronic interdiction; to avoid those demands, the United States and the Cairns group table offers that the European Union finds attractive and important.

The European Union is tempted by, for example, proposals addressing important issues such as intellectual property. Anti-dumping is another important issue which is used abusively, particularly by the United States.

The demonstrators were often arguing against each other. However much the trade unions ascribed to themselves the right to prescribe what the developing world wanted, they were arguing against the stated interests of the developing world.

There is a real moral choice in the matter. What is the moral response to a situation in which a child in India is making footballs to pay for food for the family or for education? How many people in India, perhaps working in airline ticket processing offices, come from families who owe their start to practices that we should not wish to have in our own country and should like to see ended in India? Addressing those issues will involve a moral choice, and not a simplistic one. As the Secretary of State for International Development said, the danger is that we will push developing countries further into poverty by blocking the one avenue that they have to exploit a resource they have—currently, cheap labour is a resource that they have.

Targeting globalisation seems to be politically easy, but is intellectually and economically misplaced. Globalisation is a much smaller cause of job loss than is technical change, deregulation, competition and changing consumer tastes. The response to globalisation should entail a much greater emphasis on training and education. Labour standards, like birth rates, are largely a function of economic development. Trade sanctions cannot effectively improve labour standards.

I do not think that there are irreconcilable differences. The WTO is now on its ninth round, and there have been crises before. However, the round must be launched as soon as possible. Although, realistically, we shall probably have to wait for the new American President to be in office before the new round commences, reform should not depend on that.

There are various interesting reform proposals, such as opening up the disputes procedure, which was an improvement on previous mechanisms. We now have a system whereby disputes are brought into a forum that provides a sanctioned retaliation process. Previously, the retaliation process was wild.

The disadvantage is that the current system is a prism that tends to focus debates on, for example, bananas—which the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington was talking about—or on beef hormones, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal dealt with. We have at least to ensure that, in those arguments, perhaps non-governmental organisations are able to make representations so that the balance of argument may be weighed more transparently, and perhaps also so that a greater range of arguments is considered in the debate.

I sympathise with the view expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal that perhaps a parliamentary scrutiny body could at least enable the WTO to explain and make its case more effectively.

I hope that the Government will do two things, the first of which is to argue the moral case for free trade. The Government often show a marked reluctance to argue their case. Although they say that they are intellectually convinced on an issue, they do not seem to want to convince anyone else of it. The Secretary of State for International Development is an exception to that. I noticed that the recent problem with the euro was dealt with by having the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), trundle around on a train or on a bus, whereas the Chancellor of the Exchequer remained in absolute Trappist silence throughout. There has not always been such silence.

Although the current argument on Anglo-French defence has much merit in it, the running has been made entirely by opponents of joint defence. The Government do not seem to want to get out and argue their case. World trade is more important than either of those issues; the Government must therefore get out and argue their case.

Secondly, the Government must recognise the validity of the concerns that have been expressed, at least when those concerns are not simply protectionism masquerading as altruism. However, they have to pursue the matters in appropriate bodies, with sensibly established relationships and structure. That is where process really is important.

We shall probably have to wait until after the United States elections to have someone with the confidence to be able to take the negotiations forward, free from a political timetable. The issues are enormous, material in their effect, moral in their force and—I persist in believing, despite the representations of some Labour Members—essentially intertwined both with individual empowerment and improving the democratic process on our planet.

4.38 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I thank my right hon. Friends for all the initiatives that they have taken in this matter and that they have conveyed to the House today.

Although I was very much of a sceptic before the Seattle talks began, I accepted and supported the Government's aims of trying to balance free trade with environmental and developmental concerns—in short, trying to make the World Trade Organisation work for the world's poor rather than, in Oxfam's words, being "loaded against the poor". However, when it became clear that Commissioner Lamy had entered into a stitch-up with United States negotiators on genetically modified organisms, I for one was relieved that the talks had failed, since such a deal would have been profoundly unethical, undemocratic and hugely damaging to developing countries.

The World Trade Organisation's attitude to genetically modified organisms goes to the heart of a rules-based system. What should take priority—the rules on free trade or those designed to protect people and the environment? Compromises are often desirable, but they are not always possible. Sometimes an absolute choice has to be made.

By common consent, the jury is out in Europe on GMOs. We cannot be sure that there are no long-term effects on animals or humans from eating them and we have a host of reasons for believing that they may have adverse effects on our environment. To their great credit, Labour Ministers have adopted the precautionary principle, after the previous Government's reckless leap into the dark. United Kingdom citizens have the right to say no to GMOs and to insist on accurate labelling and separation. In the United States, no such consumer rights

[Joan Ruddock]

were developed alongside the new technologies. In Seattle it became clear that the United States was determined to use the WTO to threaten the rights of citizens and Governments worldwide to restrict trade in genetically modified organisms.

Earlier this year, as the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) recalled, the same US intransigence over the hierarchy of rules and their insistence on free trade above all else caused the breakdown of the talks on the biosafety protocol, which is the appropriate forum for a discussion of genetic engineering. GMOs raise health, environmental, social and economic issues that cannot and should not be dealt with in the WTO. The potential risks and impact of GMOs in the UK have been well rehearsed in the House and I do not propose to dwell on them, but the economic consequences for the developing world are less well known.

World trade in biotechnology is not about improving crops for home consumption, but about controlling the production of food for export markets, including from developing countries to rich consuming industrialised countries. Closely allied to the development of genetically modified crops is the business of patenting life forms, covered by the World Trade Organisation trade-related intellectual property agreement—TRIPS for short. Both are profoundly threatening to the three quarters of the developing world's population who live and trade or die on the land.

The development charity ActionAid has documented the threats in a recent report called "Crops and Robbers". Proper concern for safety and the environment has led the Government to limit the introduction of GM crops to farm-scale trials and monitoring for a minimum of three years. Within those three years, the biotech companies expect 550 million hectares—more than half of the GM crops planted worldwide—to be planted in developing countries. The lobbying of those companies, in concert with the United States, led to the collapse of the talks on the biosafety protocol, which was aimed at developing an agreement on the safe transfer, handling and use of GMOs.

The consequences for poor farmers in developing countries are profound. Seed saving is a way of life for 1.4 billion farmers around the developing world. Using GM patented seed means having to buy new every year. It means having to buy the relevant pesticides or herbicides and becoming enslaved to corporate agri-business. I shall share with the House the bizarre but true story of a farmer caught up in such agri-business. He grew his oilseed rape every year for 40 years. He sprayed the edges of his fields with herbicide that killed the weeds and any oilseed rape in the vicinity. Imagine his surprise when last year all the weeds died but the oilseed rape continued to grow. The farmer grew his crops from his own saved seed, but his neighbours were growing GM herbicide-resistant oilseed rape. He quickly realised that his crop had become contaminated with the GM crop.

Hon. Members might believe that the farmer had cause to complain to Monsanto. On the contrary, Monsanto sued him, demanding the return of the seeds or the crop containing the patented genes, plus punitive damages for illegally obtaining the seeds, plus the company's court costs. That is the nature of the biotech company that confronts the world's poorest farmers, yet the story that I have related is not that of a poor South American or Indian farmer. He is a third generation Canadian farmer with a prairie farm. Percy Schmeiser is now counter-suing Monsanto for defamation and what he calls disregarding the environment. As he said, he did not watch his grandparents clear the land and build a farm to have the profits taken over by a big multinational. The world's poor farmers would share his sentiments, but they have no way of mounting such a legal challenge and defence.

In parallel with the loss of control for nation states and individual farmers over trade in GM crops comes a new threat: the extraction and patenting of individual genes, proteins and gene sequences. The south is the source of 90 per cent. of the world's biological wealth, yet industrialised nations hold 97 per cent. of all patents. Already corporate control extends over the world's staple crops through patents on forms of maize, potato, soya bean and wheat. The higher prices on patented seeds and accompanying royalties are likely to outweigh any possible benefit that genetically modified crops might bring to poorer farmers.

Even more alarming is the potential for substitution of whole crops in the laboratory. The 600,000 cocoa farmers in Ghana provide about 40 per cent. of their country's foreign exchange income. What would happen to the Ghanaian economy if the west no longer wanted cocoa? It could happen. Mars UK has just obtained two patents on the genes for cocoa flavour from west African cocoa and Dupont has a patent for a gene that can produce a substitute for cocoa butter.

I have limited my remarks today to aspects of TRIPS because of its central importance to food security and trade for developing countries. I believe—as do many non-governmental organisations such as ActionAid, Oxfam and the World Development Movement—that TRIPS should be amended to enable countries to exclude from patentability all genetic sources for food and agriculture. While the crucial distinction between invention and discovery should protect such sources at present, the bio-piracy cases, such as basmati rice, prove otherwise.

I urge my right hon. Friends closely to consider the evidence for such amendment because, as other speakers have noted today, these talks are part of the continuing round, not a new round. The collapse of the Seattle talks has given us much-needed breathing space. I very much welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's commitment to the reform of the WTO. The leading role of the UK Government is especially welcome, given our close links with the many developing countries in the Commonwealth.

Many of the reports from Seattle suggested opposing agendas between NGOs, and between NGOs and developing countries. I was not there, and although I am sure that there is some truth in that, I have met many NGOs in this country—particularly from the development field—and their conclusions on the way forward show a remarkable degree of consensus. I urge my right hon. Friends to continue the dialogue with them.

Ways must be found to make the WTO more transparent and more democratic. The growing voice of the poorest countries must be given due weight, and the review of the processes must include an assessment of the impact of the WTO agreements to date, including the Marrakesh decision, which has never been implemented.

New guiding principles—including sustainable development and poverty reduction—are required. Critically, the relationship between the WTO rules and international conventions and treaties on human rights and the environment—particularly biodiversity—must be clarified.

I warmly welcome the Government's proposals for reform. I say to Ministers that they will have the support of all right hon. and hon. Members if they pursue with the utmost vigour the establishment of a democratic rules-based trading system that has poverty reduction at its heart.

4.50 pm

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): I am glad that the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) referred to trade-related intellectual property rights, which are extremely important and can be discussed now, as they are a subject for review. There is also the advice from the sustainable development panel to take into account. Something can be done here and now, irrespective of what happened at Seattle, which is of immense importance to agriculture in the third world.

The approach that my hon. Friends and I who serve on the Select Committee on Environmental Audit have taken to these issues has been through the spectrum of sustainable development. That concept has become very chi-chi and acceptable in recent years, and has strengths and weaknesses, but in this context, it is highly relevant. We are looking not only at economic and trading questions, but particularly at social questions arising from the horrendous poverty in the low-income countries of the world and at the environmental damage that trade can do. It is particularly important to see these issues in that context.

The Government's willingness to take account of environmental as well as developmental considerations has been impressive. I was glad that the Minister for the Environment was present in Seattle as well as the Secretary of State for International Development.

Having praised the Government, I shall now take a little of that praise away. The Select Committee report criticised the Government for one fundamental flaw in their approach to the negotiations, relating to the choice that they had to make between going for a comprehensive round and the built-in agenda from the previous Uruguay round. The Government made a mistake in going for the comprehensive round rather than the built-in agenda, which is limited to agriculture and services.

Clare Short: I know that the hon. Gentleman is concerned about the environment, and anyone who wants change must accept the need for mutual recognition of multilateral environmental agreements. We need enough issues on the table for all sides to gain enough, so that they will move to get an agreement. We cannot get an agreement on new and complex issues without a broader round.

Mr. Horam: I do not agree with the Secretary of State. She used the word "complex" and these are very complex issues. The problem is that the capacity of many of these countries to deal with complex issues—which are made more complicated if they are expanded—is limited. As we know, the United States has 250 permanent representatives in Geneva, while 35 countries have none. We need to build capacity if we are to deal with the complex issues.

In addition, it is not just a question of the capacity of the countries of the third world—it is also a question of their suspicions. The hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said, rightly, that we have to look at the matter from their perspective as well as our own. The deal that those countries have got over the past 20 years as a result of successive trade rounds is not very good.

The World Development Movement has stated that 59 of the poorest countries of the world have seen their gross domestic product decline over the past 15 years. We are used to an ever-expanding GDP. We think it is a terrible problem if our GDP does not expand for two quarters in a row, whereas those 59 countries have seen a 15-year decline. When it comes to trade liberalisation, therefore, we have to address questions of trust and suspicion

One reason for the decline is the collapse in commodity prices, which has been a huge factor in depressing the standard of living in many third-world countries, and there are also political reasons. However, some trade liberalisation has contributed to the collapse in the standard of living in some of the poorest countries. It is not only the concept of trade liberalisation being put into practice that has presented them with difficulties, but the fact that it has not been well implemented. Some of the provisions for agriculture and textiles, which would have benefited the poorer countries, have not been implemented, but others, which damage them, have. Those poorer countries regard trade liberalisation with great suspicion and we have to take that into account.

No proper appraisal has been made of the consequences for the world of the previous trade rounds. As we know, the European Union, which is representing the UK in the rounds, has begun a process of appraisal. As it happens, it has been mainly done in this country and Manchester university has taken the lead in the research. However, what has been done so far is purely a scoping exercise and the real appraisal has yet to come. Despite that, we are talking about starting a further round in the next calendar year. We need a properly sequenced appraisal of the consequences of the last round to enable us to learn the lessons from it before starting the next round. It has been pointed out by hon. Members on both sides of the House that the existing discussions have not been open enough. That is not just a question of the relationship with civil society—although that is important, as several hon. Members have said—it relates to what actually happened in Seattle. I was not there, unlike my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), who always seems to be at the big environmental dos. I wish I had his luck. The fact remains that many who were invited to the conference by the director general of the WTO found that they were locked out of the so-called green room, where 30 or so of the leading countries were holding the real negotiations. It is no wonder that the excluded representatives were reduced to thumping the table and behaving in a somewhat unmannerly fashion when they discovered the real situation.

I would plead for a more inclusive approach—and the Environmental Audit Committee would, I believe, take a similar line—which is essential, as well as a more measured approach. People say that we cannot turn back

[Mr. Horam]

the clock—that we must carry on. Why? Trade happens every day. Do we need to rush into something that could have serious adverse consequences for participants without thinking more clearly about the effects?

I agree with the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) and others about the advice that is being given to the Government as they move forward. I would like to see the conference on reform of the WTO actually taking place and being taken seriously. Who takes part and how participation takes place are both important. I should like to see the funding of increased capacity to take part in the negotiations being taken seriously and I welcomed the words of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about the Government's commitment to that.

The interface of the negotiations with environmental treaties should also be considered, and that can be done separately from the other discussions. For example, the multilateral environmental agreements, of which there are some 230 throughout the world, must be examined closely. The European Union, which is our negotiating arm, must take environmental questions more seriously than it has so far.

I recommend to the House the further report by the Environmental Audit Committee. In addition to the one we produced on the agenda for Seattle, we also produced one on the agenda for Helsinki, which starts this evening. We point out that environmental integration should be a top priority. Whatever other issues the heads of state address, we want to see the importance of the environment being brought into the mainstream of European thinking.

5 pm

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), with whose analysis of the early situation I entirely agree. In opposition, I was shadow Minister for Trade: I thought then that it was more appropriate to complete the Uruguay round before a new, comprehensive round was embarked on. That was also the view of the United States Government at the time.

However, a conversion on the road to Damascus—or Seattle—changed the US opinion, with the consequences that we all saw. The conference was ill prepared, and different nations had different agendas. For example, Japan and India were concerned about the US stance on anti-dumping, while the UK had an agenda towards the third world; the US had an agenda with regard to the common agricultural policy, and the European nations had an agenda of their own. No country had an agenda for itself, but all countries had agendas for other countries. It was not surprising, therefore, that the talks collapsed early.

The hon. Member for Orpington mentioned the green room discussions that took place towards the end of the conference. I agree with him that many countries did not attend the talks because they could not afford to go. However, until the green room talks, the fact that meetings were split between four groups of countries meant that all countries attending had an opportunity to take part in the discussions. The problem was that all countries had a set agenda from which they were not prepared to move. The conference collapsed because most of the member states attending thought that that was preferable to reaching agreement. That does not augur well for any future round of talks.

The hon. Member for Orpington also made the interesting point that, after all the trade round discussions held over many years, the gross domestic product of 59 countries had fallen. However, as he noted, the collapse of commodity prices demonstrated that other economic forces were at work. Those forces impinge on the development of free trade but are related neither to the conference at Seattle, nor to the World Trade Organisation.

I was highly impressed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, not only for his speech today but for his conduct at the discussions and negotiations in Seattle. I continue to follow trade matters, especially in the European context, and many observers from outside our country who were at Seattle have commented on my right hon. Friend's performance.

My right hon. Friend spoke of trade liberalisation into the 21st century. We should be grateful for small mercies—in this case, the fact that he did not talk about trying to lay down a trade policy that would last through the next millennium. Instead, he was content with a policy for the next 100 years.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) for ensuring that the case of poor countries has been heard today. However, after what happened in Seattle, all nation states, rich and poor alike, will feel the need to move forward on a number of fronts in the face of increasing globalisation.

When we consider Seattle, we need to get the context right. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was right to point out the significance and importance of trade for the United Kingdom. We are the fifth largest exporter of goods and services in the world: 25 per cent. of our GDP takes the form of exports, and 5 per cent. of all world trade emanates from the UK. We must not overlook those facts.

The Labour party has always said, in opposition and in government, that it believes in the goal of fair and balanced trade under the auspices of rules-based organisations such as the European Union and the WTO. The rules of the WTO appear to have worked effectively, and its disputes panel has done its job. Although we in the European Union may be unhappy that rulings on banana importations—referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington—and on hormone-treated beef have gone against us, it should be noted that the WTO has also found against the United States on behalf of Venezuela, Brazil and Costa Rica.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) listed earlier a number of sectors in our country which have been penalised as a consequence of the WTO's decision on banana importations. As a result of a debate in this House and the representations of the Department of Trade and Industry, the cashmere industry was removed from the list. The combined consequence of events in Seattle, the disputes panel and the fact that no overall agreement was reached is likely to be more skirmishing rather than a trade war.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) made an impressive and cognisant speech. He clearly knows his subject well—he even knew that the WTO had bowed to Costa Rica. The United States has lost cases before the disputes panel. The right hon. Member for Suffolk,

Coastal (Mr. Gummer) touched on that in his speech, saying that it was surprising how much power we had given away to the World Trade Organisation. The hon. Member for Twickenham also mentioned that.

What do we want? Do we want to deal with a rules-based trade organisation? Do we want to withdraw our ambassador when we have a trade dispute? Do we want to send in a gunboat, as we did in the last century? Or are we willing to submit our disputes to the World Trade Organisation and the disputes panel? We have to live with the fact that the WTO is rules based and has a disputes panel, and we should accept its rulings.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield referred to workers' rights. They were, and should be, at the heart of the programmes for the WTO. The essence of the former general agreement on tariffs and trade was that nation states would recognise that the economic endeavours in their trade relationships would be a quest to raise living standards. Trade deals and trade organisations count for nothing if they do not raise the living standards of people throughout the world. The essence of GATT, which has been passed on to the World Trade Organisation, is that an effort should be made not only to raise living standards but to ensure full employment, built upon the development of the world's resources by expanding the production and exchange of goods.

Workers' rights are extremely important. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton spoke about child labour, as did the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry). We should not be afraid to look at the issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred to a conference at INSEAD, just outside Paris, where they discussed bringing in the International Labour Organisation, the World Trade Organisation, the United Nations and the World Bank to examine workers' rights. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development said, quite rightly, that they should run in parallel—the ILO should look at workers' rights and the WTO should look at trade matters. If we work along those lines, we should reach a consensus.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry also mentioned tariff-free reimportations from less developed countries. That proposal has been put to the European Union. I hope that it will be put to the conference on 15 December between the United States and the European Union.

I could have wished for more time in which to speak in this debate, but I want to allow as many of my hon. Friends as possible to speak. After Seattle, there may be a mountain to climb on the terms of a new negotiating round, on the so-called inbuilt agenda, on accessions such as that of China and on the business of applying the rules transparently and consistently to all. It is said that faith can move mountains—that, of course, is not the case. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield, who twice referred to the deity in his speech.

In fact, it is not faith but the illusion of faith that moves mountains, which will inspire men and women of good will to seek to advance in the areas left in abeyance at Seattle. They will do so not to satisfy narrow commercial interests, or to satisfy profit as greed, or to serve mammon, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield said. We want the member states of the WTO to seek development in their countries so that individuals—men and women—may have opportunities. Those opportunities should apply not only to those living today, but to their children in their lifetimes.

When the dust has settled in Seattle, and when the pepper gas that afflicted even the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal has dispersed, we shall see what the trade agenda is. If we move slowly, we should move positively. We should fully support the proposals advanced today by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for both the EU and the WTO.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Several hon. Members have asked me when they might be called to speak. I have not been able to assist them until now, but as six more hon. Members wish to speak, if each of them takes 12 minutes, we should be just in time for the wind-up speeches. I am in the hands of the hon. Members concerned; if they speak for longer than 12 minutes, as they are entitled to do, someone will be disappointed.

5.11 pm

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): In a spirit of negotiation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I offer you 10 minutes? That will allow others to go on a bit longer as I am sure that they will have much to say.

The World Trade Organisation is portrayed as trying to sort out the problems that face the poorest peoples of the world. However, some figures may depress those who claim that increasing free trade around the world helps the poorest. Since the Uruguay round, world trade has increased by roughly £200 billion. Some 70 per cent. of the benefits have gone to industrialised countries. Transnational corporations control 70 per cent. of world trade and 80 per cent. of all foreign investment. One third of developing country members of the general agreement on tariffs and trade earn most of their foreign exchange from agriculture, and a fifth or more of it from textiles and clothing—the two sectors most prayed against by the richest countries of the world.

Since Uruguay, the reality has been a rapid shift of power and wealth from the poorest countries to the richest. To say that benefit has been fairly spread is to fly in the face of reality. All that my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said about the plight of small farmers in the eastern Caribbean could be repeated 100 times for countries throughout sub-Saharan Africa in which agricultural production has been damaged by the import of western food, and where manufacturing industry is at a standstill in countries not allowed to sell their goods elsewhere. Yet those countries are told that the most important thing in the world is to pay off their debts and adopt the programmes of good governance ordained by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

As we reach the end of the 20th century, I see a bitterly divided world. The gap between the richest and the poorest has never been bigger, and it is growing fast. The poorest people in the poorest countries face an ever-tightening spiral of worse living standards, worse education and worse public services. They also face greater investment of multinational capital as it exploits the low wages on offer.

The global environment is being seriously damaged. Sustainable agriculture is best performed by small farmers who understand the environments in which they work.

[Mr. Jeremy Corbyn]

The Jamaican and Caribbean banana producers described by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington have practised sustainable agriculture for several hundred years. The prairie-type farming techniques of the big banana producers in central America and Colombia devastate the environment with their high-intensity use of pesticides and herbicides. In the long term, they are also extremely damaging to the ecosystem. They have destroyed rain forests to ensure that sort of production, whereas the small farmers that my hon. Friend described work in sympathy with their environment and have a sustainable form of living. Those issues are very important.

Likewise, the ever-present demand that we should rapidly increase world trade means more travel—more ships and more aircraft. There seems to be something fundamentally wrong when vegetables are air-freighted from the poorest countries, such as Zambia, to European supermarkets to make money for certain companies, but children in Zambia are going without; and when children and others are doing badly in such countries. There is something badly wrong with an economic system that encourages that sort of nonsense.

We need to consider what could be possible and what needs to be done post-Seattle. I have some questions, with which I hope the Minister will be able to deal, if not now then at some other stage.

Why did the Seattle conference become such complete chaos? Why was the American negotiator also the chairman of the conference? Why did that negotiator systematically exclude large numbers of southern and poor countries from any reckoning? A large number of non-governmental organisations were present in Seattle to protest legitimately on behalf of the poorest people of the world—after all, a quarter of the world's population lives below starvation level and has a right to be heard.

However, in the home of Microsoft and Boeing, the Seattle police, with riot gear and all the rest, destroyed any rights of democratic protest. The protesters were then described as undemocratic people who were trying to disrupt the conference; the undemocratic people were in the conference, excluding the poorest in the world. The representatives of the poorest in the world and, interestingly, of many American trade unions, were on the streets of Seattle seeking justice. We should ask serious questions about why all that came about.

Many people have written a great deal about the north-south divide and how it is to be dealt with. A recent edition of "Third World Resurgence" contained a splendid article by Martin Khor from Malaysia, who described exactly what it means to the poorest countries when the WTO lectures them on competition. It is not interested in competition in those countries; it is interested only in the rights of the biggest global corporations to behave as they wish in the poorest countries. That is what the multi-national agreement on investment—that ill fated agreement, which sadly, is no more—was trying to achieve. I detect that the Seattle round was an attempt to bring back that same agenda for the poorest people.

After the failure of Seattle, Friends of the Earth sent round a memo, which I am sure many hon. Members have. It sets out a series of questions and issues with which it wants the Government to deal. First, it wants a review of United Nations conference on trade and development and WTO procedures, to find out whether they genuinely represent the needs of the people of the world.

On corporate control, it seems that, post-cold war, the United Nations has largely abdicated any responsibility for controlling what global corporations do, and most national Governments have abdicated their responsibility for trying to control such corporations. In fact, countries are in competition to offer the biggest tax incentive, the longest tax holiday and the largest amount of free land, with the least labour regulation, the least environmental control and the least child protection, to entice these greedy global corporations in, one after the other.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): Does my hon. Friend agree that that is why we need some multinational agreement?

Mr. Corbyn: I am not against multinational agreements; I am against an agreement that is designed by, and to benefit, the biggest businesses. That is why I am repeating for the record the issues that Friends of the Earth raised after the Seattle summit.

Friends of the Earth wants to keep investment out of the WTO. It mentions the serious problem of the reform of agricultural procedures, makes a crucial point about intellectual property rights and genetic modification technology and refers to a multilateral environment agreement. The latter is particularly important.

The Rio summit on the environment was seen as a turning point—it was seminal, in that all countries were represented there. They agreed that there were finite limits to the amount that could be taken out of the earth and to the amount of pollution that the atmosphere could take, given its long-term effects. Unfortunately, following the Rio summit, the UN office on multinational corporations was closed. Almost automatically, all economic thinking, ideas and controls were transferred from the limited democracy of the UN system to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—both organisations are accountable only to the richest groups in the world.

I am glad that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry suggested that there would be some support for the increase of capacity-building in the world's poorest countries, so that they can negotiate effectively with companies and other countries, and that there would be some more WTO money for that. We must ensure that the poorest people in the world have a voice in those negotiations. We need to control the world's economy; we should not merely make the world fit for big businesses to operate in. There should be a moratorium on WTO disputes. The US attitude towards the banana conflict—and many similar matters—suggests the uses to which WTO power is put.

My final remarks relate to labour standards and employment throughout the world. The International Labour Organisation was set up after the first world war. It was a triumph for international trade unionism—the principle of basic labour standards all around the world had been achieved. However, many of the ILO conventions—limited though they are—are ignored. Many of the people who work—often at arm's length—for the world's big businesses enjoy no trade union rights

or job security. They have none of the rights that we would expect as a norm in western Europe. If we do not do something about that, employment practices in the industrial countries will also be under threat, as big business moves its interest back to those areas.

I point out to those who say that we should do nothing that it is wrong to sell at high prices in Oxford street all the accoutrements of modern life—rugby balls, footballs, sports shoes at £60 or £70 a pair—when they are made by children in third-world countries who earn £1 or $1 a week. It is right to take sanctions against those countries which exploit children throughout the world. We cannot shrug off that responsibility; we must get involved. We should also pay attention to the practice in many countries of establishing tax-free economic zones for big business, while operating a no-go area for trade unions.

Finally, I draw the House's attention to an excellent article in yesterday's *Guardian* by Vandana Shiva—a brilliant writer. She stated:

"We want a new millennium based on economic democracy, not economic totalitarianism. The future is possible for humans and other species only if the principles of competition, organised greed, commodification of all life, monocultures, monopolies and centralised global corporate control of our daily lives enshrined in the WTO are replaced by the principles of protection of people and nature, the obligation of giving and sharing diversity, and the decentralisation and self-organisation enshrined in our diverse cultures and national constitutions."

We have an opportunity to do something to make the world a better place. Seattle did not achieve that. We have an obligation to try again in a much more democratic and open framework than was presented at Seattle.

5.23 pm

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Everyone who has spoken in the debate accepts that we need rules. We cannot have a trade system with no rules. The argument is about what the rules should be and how they should be developed—that second point has frequently been raised. It is obvious that, as we could not even agree the agenda for Seattle—never mind debate what the rules should be—there is a long way to go. We should not expect, or try to achieve, a quick fix.

One of the lessons of Seattle is that, if the WTO is to continue, which it obviously will, an enormous amount has to be done to build trust in the organisation. The WTO will need radical reform to achieve that. One of the key demands in Seattle from the representatives of developing countries was a willingness for the WTO to look back—to review what happened in previous rounds and to reform before moving on to wider and new matters.

We need to consider the fundamental reasons for the WTO's existence. This afternoon we have heard a great deal about the merits of free trade. I am not sure why, but something in me always gets suspicious when those on the Government and Opposition Front Benches are in absolute agreement on something. Everyone tells us that free trade is all that is needed—but there are some fundamental contradictions. It is contradictory to say that free trade is all that is needed and then to say that we need a rules-based system. What will those rules be? If those rules impose no restrictions and the only rule that anyone is interested in is that there should be no tariffs, we can forget about who decides what happens to the environment or to labour conditions.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State held up eastern Europe as an example, which caused me some surprise because I should not have thought that what is currently happening in some of the economies there is a good advertisement for liberalisation.

The least developed countries' share of world trade has been decreasing. We should not just be arguing about how we achieve a level playing field; the question should be, how do we achieve a playing field that slopes in favour of those poorest people in the world? Their standard of living needs to be lifted. I doubt that a level playing field will ever achieve that.

Trade growth matters less than the nature of the trade—whether that trade is sustainable and whether it is trade that the developing countries want. One of the key questions that we should be addressing is what type of trade do developing countries want?

The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) mentioned the fall in commodity prices in the past 20 years. That has had a dramatic effect on some of the least developed countries, and the WTO and international trade rules have no mechanism for addressing that. When a country largely depends on a single commodity, such a fall in prices can be enormously damaging. The example of the banana trade shows that dependence on a single commodity or product leaves a country tremendously vulnerable to sudden movements in price or sudden changes in trade rules. We must somehow shift the agenda to one about the nature of trade and how we can develop trade systems that address poverty and inequality, because unquestionably the present system has signally failed to do so.

I was glad to hear what the Secretary of State said about some of the issues for institutional reform within the WTO. He spoke about the need for capacity-building in the developing countries, which needs to be internal as well as external, so that it is possible to monitor what is happening, whether rules are being applied and what their effects are. He spoke about the need to be willing to listen. He said that we need a more transparent organisation, and that non-governmental organisations should participate. I welcome those comments.

My right hon. Friend said that there should be more participation by parliamentarians in the WTO. Notably, we are holding the debate after the collapse of the talks in Seattle instead of before them, when it might have been possible for Members' views to have had some influence on the Government's agenda at those talks. We are doing things in the wrong order. Future debates should be timed to take place before, not after, such talks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) made some important arguments on TRIPS. There is a big question about what the TRIPS agreement is designed to do. Is it designed to promote the public interest in the widest sense of ensuring that people, especially those in poorer countries, have access to advances in technology, agriculture, medicine and health care, or is it intended to protect commercial interests?

It is clear in which direction TRIPS is aimed. Let us consider what has happened in the past few years. Since 1985, why have nearly 11,000 patents for plants been registered in the United States? Patent applications at the World Intellectual Property Organisation have increased from 3,000 in 1979 to 67,000 in 1997. India now has a backlog of 30,000 patents waiting to be processed; the number is increasing at 13,000 a year.

[Mr. Neil Gerrard]

Why does a company want to patent basmati rice, to take the example mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Deptford? However, a company in Texas now has a patent in the United States for basmati rice. What is the point of that?

I was somewhat disturbed that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development said yesterday at Question Time:

"New inventions are the only intellectual property that can be registered. Under the WTO, there is no threat at all to any traditional knowledge or biodiversity . . . that is a myth."—[*Official Report*, 8 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 811.]

I suggest that many people are familiar with the patenting of plants that have been naturally developed by farmers through many years of effort and cross-breeding. Patenting such plants is bio-piracy; it is stealing the work that has been carried out over generations.

Everyone is opposed to any attempts to patent human genes, and the Prime Minister and the President of the United States have made clear their opposition to that. However, why should we be opposed to the patenting of human genes, but not be opposed to patenting plant genes or animal genes? What is the essential difference? We must question why large companies are interested in such patents.

It is surprising what one finds when one considers the areas on which the WTO has an effect. It has impacts on health. One of the articles in GATT gives Governments the right to enforce or adopt measures to protect human, animal and plant life. They are public health measures, but the problem is that the nature of them is not defined. Therefore, we face the difficult problems of beef that has been treated with hormones, genetically modified food and how we resolve disputes over such matters. We must consider how far we should apply precautionary principles.

In May this year, the World Health Assembly, which is made up of representatives from many Governments, adopted a resolution that calls upon member states

"to explore and review their options under relevant international agreements",

including trade agreements on health—for example, on access to essential drugs. The World Health Organisation has a list of essential drugs and, interestingly, that list is not purely based on the drugs' effects. It takes into account economic considerations and, specifically, the price of the products.

Earlier this year, we saw the potential for dispute. For some time under TRIPS, patent protections on drugs must be available for 20 years. Sometimes developing countries have refused to grant such patents. Instead, they prefer to imitate a patented product and to develop a generic copy. TRIPS would forbid that, although there are get-out clauses that allow, for example, compulsory licensing of drugs.

Compulsory licensing involves a licence within a country to work a patent without permission from the original patentee, while the original patent holds in other countries. Compulsory licensing has been used by many countries for, among other things, defence-related products. It has been used in only a limited number of developing countries because not many of them have a big enough market to develop generic drugs. That is another area that we ought to review.

Seattle has given us an opportunity to step back a little, and to take a fundamental look at the WTO and some of the major areas for review before we move on to new areas.

5.35 pm

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): Like my hon. Friends, I am delighted to participate in this important debate. We can speak only for about 12 minutes each if we are to leave enough time for every hon. Member who wants to speak. Unless one of my hon. Friends wants to volunteer any of his or her time, in which case I would happily speak for longer, I shall try to stick to my 12-minute limit. Perhaps my Front-Bench colleagues would like to give up some of their time.

I shall deal with the criticisms and concerns about the World Trade Organisation that have been expressed in the House and throughout the world. Before I do so, I point out that I do not share Conservative Front-Bench Members' unbridled enthusiasm for freeing the world of all tariffs. That, to me, would be an absolute and unfettered free market, and it would not achieve the level playing field that my hon. Friends want or even an imbalance in favour of the developing nations and those with less strong economies.

I would not sign up to that idea of free trade, and I was surprised by the comments of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning). She is not here, so it may be unfair of me to mention her, but her colleague, the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), may respond to that issue in his wind-up. I do not understand how the Conservative party, which was in power for the 18 years during which many of the tariffs were implemented, can now demand the abolition of the majority of those tariffs. I would welcome a response to that from the hon. Gentleman.

I shall comment on three areas: the lack of openness and accountability in the WTO; the need to address the concerns of poorer nations; and the need for the WTO to co-operate with other international organisations and agencies if it is to achieve its objective.

Everyone has mentioned the lack of openness and democracy in the WTO. It is well recognised that reform is needed. We need to change the system of secrecy and the practice of basing newspaper reports on unattributable briefings from people who are alleged to be close to negotiations rather than the participants themselves. We need to involve civic society, including representatives from trade unions and other organisations, and give them full observer status in negotiations.

We need a more effective and quicker negotiation process. Many of the countries that were hoping for some benefit from Seattle will have to wait a considerable time for that benefit while their economy suffers and their people survive for years in levels of poverty that we would not tolerate for one day.

I hope that we can find a way to make sure that those who oversee the disputes use open and democratic procedures to ensure that there is no conflict of interest among them and that they have no vested interest.

On the need for support for developing countries, much mention has been made of the globalisation of the marketplace. I hope that we can concentrate not only on that but on the globalisation of prosperity. We could then

spread prosperity not only in the developed nations but in those with less developed economies. We can no longer be a silent witness to the abject poverty in which perhaps up to 50 per cent. of the world's population lives.

Although there have been interesting and thought-provoking contributions from Conservative Members, I regret that those Members may be in the minority on the Opposition Benches. I stand to be corrected, but I find no echo in Conservative thinking of the many recent achievements and suggestions made by the British Government, who are at the cutting edge of effort in European Union discussions that are aimed at progressive outcomes.

I am not aware that the Conservative Government were in any way aiming at the creation of a civic society or trade union involvement in the International Labour Organisation and the general agreement on tariffs and trade. Notwithstanding the excellent speeches of some Conservative Members, their criticism of the Labour Front Bench has been shallow and not based on anything that they sought to achieve in government.

The idea of globalisation of prosperity must be considered in the context of the point made on the scale of equality throughout the world in a very interesting speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). Although I did not agree with much of what he said, we cannot live in a society—socialist or otherwise—in which the combined incomes of 225 of the richest people in the world is equal to that of 47 per cent. of the world's population. That cannot be allowed to survive, grow and become endemic over generations.

The World Trade Organisation appears to have made some headway in such matters—certainly from the material released by the Department for International Development. It is suggested that economic growth in developing nations has been quicker in the past few years than in developed nations' economies. However, developing nations are starting from a very low base, so we must ensure that such development is not marginally better and faster, but markedly so.

Since 1973, developing economies have increased their share of the world market in exports from 19 to 23 per cent. That is a welcome 4 per cent. improvement, but at that rate, two centuries will pass before they achieve parity with developed nations. That is an intolerable and also impossible situation. The rate of improvement cannot be maintained without reform. I have no idea of—and would not want to guess at—the ceiling of improvement in the economies of developing nations without reform of global markets and the WTO, but parity will certainly not be achieved today, tomorrow or in two centuries' time unless there is such reform.

The secretary-general of the WTO, Michael Moore, publicly said:

"I will judge my term in office by how we can improve the conditions and opportunities for the most vulnerable economies."

That is a very important statement. I do not know how it compares with his predecessors, but our Government and other Governments who believe in a social agenda should try to ensure that his words become as close to reality in as short a time as possible.

Around the time of the Seattle conference, President Clinton seemed to share such concerns. He made some very welcome announcements on sharing prosperity throughout the world, although it is of course hard to differentiate between those intended for domestic politics and those intended generally. He suggested some important reforms on the sale of drugs and the removing of tariffs, especially on AZT and, perhaps, other drugs, which I welcome. I have no idea how successful such moves would be in challenging AIDS in the developing world, but I welcome it none the less.

There is also the matter of lifting all tariffs on 48 of the less developed economies, which, after all, contribute only 0.4 per cent. of world trade. There is therefore no danger in that, as some believe. That goal has been identified not only by President Clinton but by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who said earlier that the European Union will be taking such action unilaterally and hopes to persuade partners in the WTO to follow suit.

Much has been said about sanctions. My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) spoke about trade sanctions against countries that do not adhere to our perceptions and our understandable demands for environmental protection and an end to child labour. My hon. Friend and I agree on the need for the protection of human rights, freedom from child labour and the long-term protection of the indigenous environment in all senses, but I am not convinced that trade sanctions will deliver the necessary support and free those children and their families from poverty.

The argument will no doubt continue, but I believe that instead of sanctions, we should provide alternative means of support so that the kids can go to school and the parents have jobs.

Mr. Corbyn: I am interested in the point that my hon. Friend is making. He may not have heard clearly what I said. I said that there should be sanctions against the companies that exploit children and live off the benefits of child labour in third world countries.

Mr. Murphy: I thank my hon. Friend. I accept that we should impose economic sanctions against the companies involved, but there is also an argument about economic sanctions against the countries, which I do not support.

Time is limited, and I want to cover other topics. The WTO does not exist in isolation. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier that ways of reforming the organisation were being discussed, and that a WTO parliament, council or assembly may be one possibility. I hope that other aspects will be discussed.

The WTO works with other organisations, including the United Nations, and takes account of the difficulties that some poor and perhaps less poor countries face. I think particularly of post-apartheid South Africa, war-torn Angola, and Mozambique, which is trying to recover from a civil war. Regardless of their relative economic position, consideration must be given to the efforts of those countries to free themselves from the legacy of apartheid, which dominated not only South Africa, but much of southern Africa.

The WTO should also take account of international debt. I welcome the Government's support for aspects of the Jubilee 2000 campaign, and their proposals for freedom of opportunity and literacy for 2015. If we are to achieve that globally, the WTO must recognise that many of the countries are highly indebted. Mozambique and

[Mr. Murphy]

Uganda pay back £100 million a year in international debt, and are both members of the WTO. Regional conflicts, debt levels and the unique challenges that some countries face should all be taken into account.

5.48 pm

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): I congratulate all those who were in Seattle as Ministers, observers and protesters, on helping to turn it into the debacle that it was. Nothing has cheered me up like that in ages. Unlike the Conservatives, I have no qualms about our having four Ministers there. The notion that the United Kingdom had four horsemen at the metropolis of free trade is an interesting one. It allows us to be clear about what we need to do in the chaotic space that Seattle created for us.

The agenda was clear. It was a wonderful opportunity to see greed and arrogance overreaching themselves. No doubt America and the corporations that were part of its delegation would say that it was not about that at all. They would argue that it was even-handed—they simply wanted the right to dump GM crops and growth-hormone beef into western markets, at the same time as dumping US grain surpluses into struggling southern markets. They wanted the right to acquire corporate ownership of services in the north and primary production in the south. That provided a corporate sense of balance.

Although the corporations talked about free trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) was right to question their belief in the removal of all subsidies. The corporate world is phenomenally good at claiming that it cannot produce anywhere unless it is paid to do so. It wants subsidies, inducements and tax sheltering to produce in our economies and it wants Governments to pick up the cost of infrastructure development. It does not want to accept the attendant obligations. The corporate world does not believe in the absence of subsidies; it simply believes in corporate welfare. Our own debates must take place with that knowledge.

We should be brave enough to define something different to put in the space that now exists. I want to make one or two moderate suggestions that are not out of line with the Labour manifesto—they are simply in line early, with the next manifesto. If we examine the lessons of Seattle, perhaps we should first consider scrapping the WTO. It would be disastrous if we all believed that we had a remit to save it. The United Nations is an international body that already has a remit to consider environmental and human rights agendas. We should consider refounding the United Nations, rather than undermining it in the interests of corporate rather than civic society.

Let us consider where such a refounding would lead. The notion that trade has meant emancipation for all and been synonymous with progress is a monstrous distortion of our recent past. Hon. Members have cited examples of market liberalisation in Europe. I invite them to read the United Nations Environment Programme's report on eastern Europe. It describes eastern Europe as an environmental catastrophe, in which civic society has almost been stripped to its basics; where democratic processes have been torn apart and economics have been reduced to gangsterism. That is the result of market liberalisation in eastern Europe.

Hon. Members also cited examples of the phenomenal early successes in parts of south-east Asia. It has been illustrative to contact colleagues and campaigners in the southern hemisphere through the internet in the past year. They say that this came from their ability to get huge subsidies from the United States, and its agencies in the World Bank, because of their terror of the spread of communism. The United States threw money at such countries in the southern hemisphere, which were able to invest in their domestic productive capacity behind protective markets. They were allowed to do that, and they did jolly well. However, in Seattle, only countries such as India said that the idea of free trade in agriculture would run through the planet like a plague of locusts and that the developing world needed a different approach to subsidies.

The world needs to subsidise the environmental goods while restricting and taxing the environmental bads. India presented a proposal for allowing developing nations to subsidise or protect their domestic industries to the point of food security and sufficiency. They should be able to define the terms for their own development. It should not be conditional on transferring the ownership of their primary producing resources, but by retaining them and not allowing resources to migrate around the planet in pursuit of the most exploitative rates of return and interest.

Those who advise us to go down other paths should bear some of the huge consequences in mind. People claim that it will be great when Poland joins the European Union, but they fail to mention that the radical reforms Poland must accept mean pushing 2 million people off the land. Those who welcome China to the WTO manage to avoid mentioning the fact that its entry presupposes that 100 million people will be pushed off the land or banished from existing employment. This will force human migration on a scale that we have never even begun to countenance, and the consequences in terms of social destabilisation will be massive.

Martin Khor, who was mentioned earlier, was one of those who at Seattle said to the west, "You have got to start to question whether trade has brought us prosperity. It hasn't. It has transferred corporate ownership without democratic accountability into the hands of the most powerful on the planet. We see that as a pillaging process, both in the context of the industrial world and the developing world." I had occasion earlier in the day to mention another aspect of globalisation, which has appeared in my constituency.

This is the last day of mass production for Raleigh as a cycle frame manufacturer in the UK. Tomorrow, it is selling off its equipment, which is the most up-to-date in the world, under the auctioneer's hammer. The equipment was installed only three years ago and will most probably be sold to competitor companies from China and Taiwan; companies which do not have to adhere to any labour standards, recognise any objection that they employ and exploit children, or conform to environmental obligations. Raleigh will say, "How can we meet the environmental obligations that you rightly expect us to meet as producers in the industrial world when you also ask us to compete in a price-only market, which is a beggar-your-neighbour race to the bottom of the barrel?"

In Seattle, trade union marchers—industrial workers and steelworkers from throughout the United States—found themselves walking hand in hand with the non-governmental organisations and lobby organisations

from the south. A new dialogue opened up between workers without jobs in the north and workers without rights in the south. They are saying, "Here is a game that strips rights, entitlements and secure prospects from us all."

The WTO is not an accountable body and it cannot address human rights issues. Nor does it want to. In July, Richard McCormick, the vice-chair of the International Chamber of Commerce—one of the main organisations lobbying the WTO—addressed a meeting of world leaders and said that the globalisation project may be terribly fragile. He added that

"its link with labour, its link with environment, could cause disaster in the trading system".

Yet that trading system is the disaster that protesters at Seattle were trying to draw to our attention. It strips us of anything sustainable in terms of human or environmental dignity and security. Asking a body that is so committed to excluding environmental and human rights considerations to take them on board would be like asking Jeffrey Archer to be responsible for truth—it simply is not in the nature of the beast to deliver such a commitment.

We have to return responsibilities to the United Nations. The third world is demanding that we look at how we target subsidies—in our own context, perhaps in favour of organic rather than chemically intensive production. We must also look at subsidies in terms of the developing world itself and its access to limited markets in which it can address food security—in the same way as we must—and build in binding obligations as well as producer responsibilities and liabilities. These must not be in parallel with other discussions, but must be part of the legally binding obligations that will define security for the next century.

A debate is already taking place outside the corridors of government and it involves not only the representation of the rights of the poor in the next century, but place new constraints on corporate activities. No representation without taxation will be the first demand—no influence without obligation. After Seattle, that agenda, whether we like it or not, is already under way.

5.59 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I declare an interest as the UK member of the drafting committee at the Inter-Parliamentary Union conference of October 1999 on the global financial and economic model, which was unanimously adopted by the 137 Parliaments. I am also an alternate member of the IPU sustainable development committee. I was a non-governmental organisation delegate to Seattle last week.

I want to correct the impression given by the only other IPU parliamentarian present—the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer). Mayor Paul Schell of Seattle wanted peaceful demonstrations and did all he could to ensure that people could sit down and prevent the conference from going ahead. What the right hon. Gentleman described as incompetent policing was, in a sense, deliberate help and encouragement for demonstrations.

Late in the afternoon a number of anarchists dressed in black with black neckerchiefs around their faces decided to smash up Seattle. I saw it happen. We then had the other side of the picture, with the police having to come in to arrest the anarchists. They had spread themselves among peaceful demonstrations and subsequently threw firecrackers into the demonstrators to get them to disperse. I managed to get into my hotel and I viewed what took place for the following two hours. I assure the House that the aggression of the anarchists was considerable. I admire the restraint of the Seattle police. There are always two sides to these matters. What was dangerous in Seattle was the hobo spider, which is endemic to the state of Washington, and by which I was bitten twice.

I pay tribute to the people of Seattle for the welcome that they gave us. I pay tribute particularly to the people of the First United Methodist Church of Seattle, the senior pastor, Rev. Kathlyn James and the chaplain, Rev. Fred Hutchinson, who hosted most of the non-governmental organisation work that went on in the city. A radio station and a television station beamed out, and it was extremely important to see the Methodist Church taking such a strong role in that. A member of the congregation told me that he did not necessarily agree with everything that was said, but thought that it was extremely important that there was a pulpit in which to say it.

The attitude of many of the NGOs in Seattle was one that I found sad. As I have mentioned the IPU conference, I shall mention the Commonwealth conference in Durban and Johannesburg. The NGO forum there and the work that came out of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting were very significant. I pay tribute to the work that was done by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for International Development. There was very much an agreement within the CHOGM that we should go forward with a development round. I remind the House that 48 of the 54 countries in the Commonwealth are developing nations. There was an extraordinary situation in which it was being said among the NGO community at Seattle that developing countries did not want to go forward with a development round. That was not true. It was important that the United Kingdom convinced the European Union to take a stance similar to ours.

It was clear from what came out of the negotiations that core labour standards and environmental standards should be dealt with in parallel with WTO but not within it. If they were taken within the WTO, there would be a veto from the developing countries.

Extraordinary things went on. I attended the Jubilee 2000 rally along with about 3,000 or 4,000 others. It was very much a rally to write off third-world debt. Then it became a rally in favour of protectionism and protecting jobs in the United States. It was taken over by the American Federation of Labor/Congress of Industrial Organisations. It may be said that that is a natural way to go forward in an environment in which there is about to be a very large march by labour the following day. However, in a sense it was sad that the Jubilee 2000 movement became mixed with a push for protectionism, which was the major element of last week.

The position in the United States was clear. It was known that a veto would come from the developing countries, but things went forward and there was a statement from Clinton in which he said that core labour rights had to be taken within the WTO.

I mention as a slight aside that having run a clothing and textile company in my past, I recognise that it is important as Marks and Spencer prepares to move many jobs out of the UK into developing countries that it listens

[Mr. Tony Colman]

to the GMB and William Baird. It is possible to retain a significant element of those jobs in design and in short-term lead times within the UK. Everyone must talk to one another rather than saying that the situation is black and white, because it certainly is not.

Before I leave the subject of developing countries, I endorse, as other Members have, the view that we need a form of investment agreement. The proposals tabled by the European Commission were extremely modest but need to be taken forward, even on the basis of the Singapore agenda. Other hon. Members have spoken about the need not to race to the bottom. It is important to recognise that, by having good investment rules, we can ensure that there is no race to the bottom. I ask the House to endorse that way forward.

The major thing that came out of Seattle, leaving aside many NGOs almost ignoring developing countries' views, was the need for a new process. Several hon. Members have talked about that. Having attended United Nations summits as part of UK delegations, I find it extraordinary how little negotiation and preparation were done for the meeting.

Some hon. Members have mentioned what happened on the Tuesday evening with the tabling of the EU position by the Trade Commissioner, Pascal Lamy, and the fact that he did not consult a single European country in doing so. It was an extraordinary document. I believe that it is available in the public arena. There were good things, however. MEAs—multilateral environmental agents—had precedence. The precautionary principle was taken account of, but the view that was put forward on behalf of the EU—not by the United States—was that the biotech regulatory regime should come within the WTO. All 15 EU countries objected to that.

It is important that, in future WTO negotiations, we revert to what happens in UN summits, where the lead country—the country with the presidency—brings together proposals, and Commissioners simply give advice rather than table positions on behalf of the EU. It was an extraordinary situation. It put negotiations back for a full two days.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry mentioned his support for a parliamentary assembly. There is an extraordinary alliance between the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), both of whom think that that is not the way forward. I wholeheartedly support democratising the WTO by having a parliamentary assembly. I hope that the matter can be tabled in time for the next meeting.

As for our own way of working, I ask the Procedure Committee to examine how we can have joined-up Parliament alongside joined-up government. Two papers have been circulated for the debate, one from the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs and one from the Select Committee on Environmental Audit. Interestingly, there is not one from the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. We may need a new system of Select Committees that brings together all the interested parties ahead of major summits, so that Parliament is able, through those Committees and debates in the House, to come to a view. I am not trying to reinvent the wheel. There is already the NATO parliamentary assembly, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe. We should press ahead with that at great speed.

I have no criticism of the UK delegation. I strongly endorse what others have said about the way it involved all the NGOs present. I pay particular tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, who put himself about all over Seattle. There was hardly an NGO meeting at which he was not present. I exaggerate slightly, but he really made efforts to ensure that views on the environment and the views of the UK Government were made known.

I felt strongly that, because there had been a lack of preparation, those on our delegation were left somewhat twiddling their thumbs until the Thursday evening. It was all waiting until the last minute. That cannot be the way forward. As I said at the beginning of my small offering, the Commonwealth, the European Union and our relationship with the United States through the Security Council mean that the UK is in a unique position.

What are the lessons to be learned? First, next time we should prioritise the developing countries and perhaps explain to the NGOs what those countries have said to us through the Commonwealth, particularly with regard to what they would like us to do. Secondly—it is a heartfelt plea—can we please avoid United States presidential election years?

Thirdly, we must have transparency of process, including, as I said, in Governments and Parliaments. I suggest that we should build on the Charter 99 proposals for a United Nations millennium assembly so that we might develop the concept of parliamentary assemblies, not only in the WTO but in the various United Nations protocols and institutions.

Finally, we should proceed as fast as we are able. In today's *Financial Times*, Mike Moore, director general of the World Trade Organisation, was quoted as saying that

"gaps were narrowed considerably"—

at Seattle—

"in a number of important areas . . . A package of results is within reach",

but:

"The longer we delay launching the negotiations, the more the poorest among us lose."

Amen to that.

6.10 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I am grateful to my right. hon. and hon. Friends for paring their speeches to enable me to speak in this important debate.

In the time available before the replies, I should like to talk about one discrete but very important issue that is part of the in-built World Trade Organisation agenda—the agreement on trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights, and particularly the WTO agreement and trade rules on patents and poor people's access to drugs. Although my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock), for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) and for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) mentioned and made important points about TRIPS, I am interested in that one aspect of it.

The production and trading of pharmaceuticals is conducted according to TRIPS, which provides that the holder of product patents—usually the major international

drug companies—are allowed to set the product price in each country in which a patent is held, or to licence others to produce or market the product on an agreed basis.

The House will know—but it bears repeating—that as we approach the end of the 20th century, almost 34 million people world wide face human immune deficiency virus and an uncertain future in the shadow of acquired immune deficiency syndrome. The fact is that 95 per cent. of those people live in the developing world and that percentage is likely to increase.

In some countries, one in four adults are HIV positive. In the five years between 2005 and 2010, life expectancy in the most severely affected countries, in southern Africa, is projected to drop by 14 years, from 59 to 45. Many countries in Asia are experiencing an explosive escalation in the numbers of people becoming infected with HIV. With half of all people who acquire HIV being children and young people under 25, AIDS strikes down some of the most productive members of those societies.

At a recent international conference in Malaysia, a senior World Bank economist warned that AIDS threatens to wipe out the last 20 years of economic gains. Yet the Nobel peace prize-winning organisation Medecins Sans Frontieres says that doctors in Kenya advise AIDS patients to save up for their funeral rather than for drugs which they will not be able to afford.

The current lack of access to HIV-AIDS care and treatment in developing countries is substantially a consequence of those countries' poverty, but it is also a consequence of the cost of medicines—which in turn is a consequence of the intellectual property rights attaching to those medicines.

International trade agreements and policies can and do affect access to goods and services that are crucial to HIV prevention, care and impact mitigation. In May 1999, the World Health Assembly unanimously passed a resolution calling on member states to

"explore and review their options under international agreements, including trade agreements, to safeguard access to essential drugs".

By manufacturing drugs within the developing world, it is possible to provide them to local people at much more affordable rates than if those people are forced to pay the global price set by western producers who hold the patent. If the drugs are not provided cheaply from local production, they are certain to be out of the price range of local people. Generic drugs made locally are about 70 to 90 per cent. cheaper, according to Medecins Sans Frontieres; in some cases, they can be 200 to 300 per cent. cheaper than branded equivalents available in the west.

The examples are stark. Flucanozole—a drug that manages cryptococcal meningitis, which is an infection that affects one AIDS sufferer in five in Thailand—was supplied exclusively by the US company Pfizer until 1998. Since local alternatives became available, the cost of the daily dosage has fallen by 95 per cent. That represents a saving of £3 million to the Thai Government each year. The 75 cents daily cost in Thailand compares with $30 a day for patients in Kenya, where the number of children orphaned by AIDS has increased by nearly 200 per cent. over the past three years.

The TRIPS agreement allows for local production of patented medicines through compulsory licensing in cases of public health emergencies or unfair pricing. However, pharmaceutical companies in industrialised nations have recently put considerable pressure on Governments not to allow compulsory licensing. In 1997, South Africa passed a medicines Act designed to enable poor people, particularly HIV sufferers, to gain access to affordable generic drugs. The law permits compulsory licensing and parallel imports, as well as encouraging generic substitution, but the US pharmaceutical industry and the US Government responded immediately, twisting the arm of the South African Government to change the law despite its compliance with the TRIPS agreement. They threatened South Africa with a case before the adjudication panel. Only in response to public protest in the US and the strong resistance of the South African Government did the US Government fortunately back down.

The European Union working paper circulated at the WTO contained the following statement of the law:

"The TRIPS Agreement, and in particular Article 31, shall be understood to permit developing countries to issue, in accordance with the provisions laid down in this article and other relevant articles, compulsory licenses for drugs appearing on the list of essential drugs of the World Health Organisation."

Despite that, there was pressure within the EU delegation from sources that represented the pharmaceutical industry to have that paragraph removed from the document.

This may sound lame but, to conclude my micro-point, I should like my right hon. Friends to do everything they can to support the EU in enforcing the inflexible interpretation of TRIPS to enable access to cheap drugs.

On a more macro level, I want to make a plea for an intellectual property rights regime that reinforces and does not act against the development goals that we set in other international commitments. The United Nations international conference on population and development in Cairo, Egypt in September 1994 agreed the following objective:

"To increase the accessibility, availability, acceptability and affordability of health care services and facilities to all people in accordance with national commitments to provide access to basic health care for all."

It also agreed the following action:

"Through technology transfer, developing countries should be assisted in building their capacity to produce generic drugs for the domestic market and to ensure the wide availability and accessibility of such drugs."

Paragraph 35 of section C of the declaration of the UN world summit for social development in Copenhagen in 1995 says:

"Governments in partnership with all other development actors in particular organisations of and for people living in poverty should co-operate to meet the basic human needs of all, including people living in poverty and vulnerable groups by:

Ensuring universal access to basic social services".

Paragraph 37 goes on to say:

"Access to social services for people living in poverty and vulnerable groups should be improved through:

Ensuring that low income communities have access to health service outlets staffed by health workers who can provide primary care, essential drugs and information."

The UN convention on the rights of the child sets out requirements and articles for preventable or treatable diseases and goes on to say that children faced with diseases and the spectre of HIV and AIDS ought to have access to the essential drugs. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's international

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

development targets were set out in the wonderful White Paper that the Department for International Development published within a month of Labour coming to office.

My argument is that the EU and its member states have signed up to all of these goals, and the current OECD development targets are all derived from them. We are in a position where these targets are aspirational. However, the WTO agreements are legally binding and subject to sanctions for non-co-operation. It is essential that we redraw trade rules so that they do not take precedence over the more fundamental commitments that we as a sovereign nation enter into.

6.20 pm

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): Human beings have never been good at looking ahead and understanding our future. Almost every prediction of future trends or of how we will live tomorrow has been proved wrong by unforeseen events and unthought-of inventions and discoveries. This remains as true today—despite our science and technology—as it was in yesteryear.

As we peer around the corner to the 21st century, can anyone doubt that we are all in for a period of massive change? There will be change on a global scale, which will rival, and probably outstrip, the turmoil and upheaval of the industrial revolution of the 19th century and the technological advances of the twentieth.

Globalisation is changing everything. New technologies are changing everything. The knowledge and information revolution is changing everything. It is producing change at a pace and on a scale that has never happened in human experience before. The challenge for the politicians of the 21st century will be to understand and manage the implications for all of us—our constituents, national sovereignty and global political structures—of all the changes.

That is the global backdrop against which we come to this important and interesting debate on the world trade talks in Seattle. Most people who have spoken in the debate support free trade. The debate on the benefits of free trade—as on liberal capitalism—is largely behind us. The Secretary of State made a strong speech in Seattle in support of free trade—a speech which, perhaps, she could not have made a year or two ago. I may be wrong on that.

It was interesting to hear some Labour Members giving speeches which appeared not to support free trade, and which harked back to a bygone era. They were wishing the ends without willing the means in their passionate advocacy of protectionism. It was interesting to hear old Labour's revenge in the debate. The speeches were interesting, but did not address the real world in which we live.

No one is saying that free trade of itself will bring about all the changes that we wish to see, both here and in the developing world. We should not forget that the Secretary of State spends most of her time focusing on things such as good governance, civil society, support for entrepreneurs in the developing world, promotion of democracy and many other ways of producing economic growth, stimulating businesses and helping the developing world. The process is not just about free trade, but free trade is a vital backdrop to our discussions about how best to help people who live in abject poverty.

We were looking to the Seattle round to make significant advances in the cause of free trade, so the failure of the Seattle talks represents a major setback. It has emerged in the debate that there is much cross-party support in our approach to the World Trade Organisation and where it should go from here. The failure of the talks demonstrated above all else that while the global economy is becoming truly internationalised, the political structures for introducing rules to govern that global economy still lag some way behind.

The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) made a powerful and important point about that issue, which has huge implications for us all, now and in the future. In this new era of globalisation, it is clear that we need to find new decision-making mechanisms for the several multinational global installations that we need to oversee these important global events.

Mr. Tony Benn: Free trade is a creature of the 19th century, before democracy. I see the whole debate—on which Front Benchers on both sides are united—as a throwback to the 19th century. The problem is that the system will not meet the needs of people in the next century, when they realise that until they can control their economic as well as their political destiny, they are simply slaves of the new corporations that have replaced the kings and tyrants of the past.

Mr. Streeter: I respect the right hon. Gentleman's view, but free trade is not a throwback to the past. It is a clear look into the future. No one claims that free trade will bring all the benefits and advantages that we wish to see—nor does it negate the importance of sound local governance in every nation state. The issue with which we have to grapple concerns the right way to make those global institutions democratically accountable. How can we plug them into the people, who may be thinking globally but still living locally? Is it not right to say that an organisation of 135 members, with more about to join—we heard about China this afternoon—cannot hope to make decisions by consensus and unanimity? Several right hon. and hon. Members referred to the need to reform the decision-making processes of the WTO, and that must be a priority.

I admired the speech by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—especially the fact that he acted as though he were announcing a great negotiating triumph from Seattle when in fact it was not a negotiating triumph but a failure. The right hon. Gentleman told us that he intends to give leadership in the matter, and that is to be welcomed. We support this Government taking forward an agenda that has emerged from our debate today. With British membership of the Security Council of the United Nations, the EU, the Commonwealth, G7 and NATO, we are well placed to give a lead in the debate.

We want to hear the Government's proposals to reform the WTO. Will it be done according to the IMF model, itself subject to criticisms of unaccountability? Will it be set up as an equivalent to the Security Council? If so, who will decide who will sit on the inner council? Will the Government propose majority voting for the WTO? I hope that they will set out their plans fully. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) requested the Government to set a timetable for those important reforms, to be encapsulated in a consultation document or White Paper on the issue, so that the House may debate it.

What should happen next? We need better diplomacy and the exercise of more influence than was displayed in Seattle. It would be wrong of me to seek to pin the blame for the failure of the talks in Seattle on our Government, and I do not for a second seek to do so. It was clearly the United States Government who brought the talks to an abrupt and unwelcome end. However, the Government called for a comprehensive round in Seattle and told the world that they wanted the talks to provide clear and decisive momentum towards global free trade. The Government have also boasted so often in the past about the influence the British Prime Minister has with President Clinton and they sent no fewer than four Ministers to the talks. So what conclusions are we supposed to draw when the talks collapse and the cause of global free trade is set back so seriously? Can we draw any other conclusion than that our Government's policy and strategy failed in Seattle? [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Do Labour Members claim that the Government's strategy was a success? The talks collapsed and the Government's strategy did not work. We need not dwell on the issue, but the point needs to be made. The Government should learn the lessons and move on.

If the Government are to take a lead on the issue, as we think they should and as they are well placed to do, it clear that they have to raise their game and start hitting their policy objectives. The fact that the Government have our support in that should be enough to encourage them to do even better.

Several excellent contributions have been made to this debate. I do not have time to mention them all, but I am keen to respond to some of the points made.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) talked about the possibility of establishing a parliament for the WTO. I hope that the Government will set out their thinking on a matter that we should like to examine in more detail. How would members of such a parliament be elected? Would it take representatives from our own Parliament? I look forward to hearing more from the Government on that.

My right hon. Friend also said that the chairman of the WTO should not be the American chief negotiator, and I profoundly agree with that. He called for some of the issues confronting the organisation—such as labour and biodiversity—to be taken forward in parallel, and for the WTO to resist the temptation to try and do everything. I strongly concur with those suggestions as well.

The hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) displayed some expertise when she talked about environmental issues, but she also made the very important point that the House would have benefited from a debate on this topic before the Seattle talks. Today's debate has shown that the House has things to say on these matters, and the Government delegation at Seattle would have been better equipped if it had had the wisdom with which a debate in the House of Commons would have furnished it. I hope that the Government will report back more fully to the House on such matters in the future.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) made a very good speech, in which he described the dangers of isolationism and the strength of feeling around the world when cheap goods flood domestic markets. He spoke of the risk that the whole trade structure could unravel, and that what he called the primeval forces of nationalism and isolationism could be released. The hon. Gentleman was right to raise that spectre in the debate. I can tell him that Conservative Members strongly support the movement to global free trade, as we have for many years. I reiterate that our target date for achieving that is 2020.

The hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington talked knowledgeably and at some length about bananas. That is an important subject, but she did not take into account the existence of the Lomé convention, which the United Kingdom continues to support. She also omitted to mention that our policy of achieving global free trade by 2020 does not involve the eradication of all subsidies and supports overnight.

The hon. Lady asked what industry Caribbean islands could diversify into. All hon. Members know the very real dangers of the drug trade, which no one could support for one second, but tourism in that part of the world is an attractive alternative for many business people.

Mr. Gummer: Has my hon. Friend noticed that the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who would not give way when she was making her speech, is not present for the winding-up speeches? I was among those who wrote the banana regime and am therefore interested in the subject. The battle is not only between America and the Caribbean, but also between the developing country of Ecuador and the Caribbean. One of the difficulties is to find an answer that will satisfy all sides. Does not my hon. Friend share my hope that we will succeed in finding an answer that will allow people in Caribbean to continue with the only product that they are able to grow?

Mr. Streeter: My right hon. Friend speaks with great knowledge, and of course I accept the point that he makes.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) made a powerful speech, in which he said that free trade was part of the buttress of the democratic process, and that cutting trade barriers amounted to a tax cut for every citizen. He added that, because business is globalising, the political process must do the same, and he spoke of movement in both the upwards and downwards directions. He used the interesting word "atomisation" and stated that decisions should be made as near as possible to the people involved.

To those hon. Members who oppose what is going on in the world today I say that what is going on cannot be stopped and that we therefore must try and shape it. The hon. Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) challenged us to explain how, after 18 years in government, we could oppose the 15,600 tariffs that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton described. I have three things to say in response. First, the general agreement on tariffs and trade rounds, under our stewardship, were very successful in reducing tariffs, for this country and for many others. Secondly, many of the tariffs have been in place for generations. Thirdly, the WTO—which has been in existence for only five years—was set up with the support of Conservative Members.

A number of lessons need to be learned from the Seattle fiasco. It is not clear that enough preparation was done in the run-up to the talks to lay the ground rules and do the spade work to resolve the big political stumbling blocks. Does the Secretary of State for International Development think that it would be helpful or unhelpful for the United

[Mr. Streeter]

States and European Union negotiators to meet outside the WTO process to deal with the vexed issue of agricultural subsidies? Is it possible, and desirable, for the big players to try and resolve the major political issues before the WTO attempts to meet in plenary session again? Does the right hon. Lady agree that for the developing countries to be invited to the talks only to find that on many occasions they were locked out of the room where the big players were talking, and did not have a clue what was going on, added insult to injury. My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) spoke about that with some feeling. Many emerging countries have been humiliated by such treatment, and it will be some time before those scars heal.

I want to record my support for the Department for International Development initiative in seeking to build the capacity of some of the developing countries. Their capacity to negotiate, implement and take advantage of the rules, particularly under the disputes procedure, is fundamental. I welcome the announcement of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about greater WTO spend on capacity building, and I strongly support the work that the Department for International Development has done on it in the past.

A situation in which the United States has 250 negotiators and Bangladesh has one is clearly unsustainable. For 30 members of the WTO to be unable to afford to send representatives to Seattle is unhelpful, if the aim is to take everyone to the same place at the same time. I know that this is the first time that many developing nations have been involved, but being involved and being locked out are two different matters. I support the Secretary of State's action in seeking to build the legal capacity of developing nations to enable them to take a full part in the proceedings.

Mr. Alan Simpson: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's reference to equity and accountability in the negotiation process, wherever it is. Would he apply that also to the position of the European Union delegation? The elected members who went there as part of Europe's delegation were out-manoeuvred by the Commissioner, who was not elected by anyone. It is like a bizarre game of football in which the team that has won 15-0 is told by the referee that it has lost because he has put a bet on the other side. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that strengthening the lines of accountability should apply to the elected representatives of the United Kingdom Parliament as well?

Mr. Streeter: I have a lot of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's point—I think that he is right. I understand that Mr. Lamy behaved in a way that was not entirely helpful, and we need to look at that.

Does the Secretary of State agree that building the capacity of developing nations and reforming the procedures of the WTO are the two most urgent tasks? If she has any specific proposals, I should be glad to hear them. Does the right hon. Lady share my concerns about the article in the *Financial Times* to which the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) referred? Mike Moore, the director general, is calling for a new round of talks "as soon as possible". Does she agree that although it is vital that nothing should stand in the way of further talks, we should, at the same time, focus on capacity building and reforming the WTO. Does she also agree that the United States presidential election should not hold up the process of capacity building and reform of the WTO?

The benefit of hindsight is admittedly helpful, but will the right hon. Lady reflect on the wisdom of calling for such a comprehensive round? Was not a large part of the failure the fact that there were too many objectives at Seattle? Was it not too ambitious a project? Did we reach too far and fall over? Is there not a case for having more limited, realistic objectives and making steady progress, rather than trying to do everything and achieving nothing? I am talking not about a narrow round, but about a realistic round.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell) and others have discussed whether the ILO might be the right forum in which to deal with labour issues. We all support free trade—at least, on second thoughts, as I look across the Chamber, most of us do. The benefits to everyone of free trade are clear, but the events of the past few days have been a bitter blow to the cause. The Government should pursue a clear agenda, pushing for rapid and radical reform of the WTO. They must do all they can to build capacity in the developing world, to exercise their alleged influence over the Clinton White House and to champion the unilateral dropping of European tariffs for the poorest. They must set a clear timetable for progress, and report back to the House. After the debacle in Seattle, the need is urgent. Britain is well placed to take a lead, and it is time that the Government seized their opportunity.

6.40 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): If anything good came of the mess at Seattle, it was the wake-up call to people in politics to discuss more openly what globalisation is, what it means and how we should manage it. There has been a lag in the political debate. I agree with the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) that we face massive historical change that requires change in our political institutions. Much of our sovereignty can no longer be exercised at home alone. We must be willing to pool sovereignty in international agreements so that we may regulate and manage the wealth that comes from globalisation. Globalisation could be used to benefit people, or could prove destructive to the world.

Globalisation is real. It is part of history, just as industrialisation was. Blake wrote poems saying that industrialisation was a bad idea, and we all still sing his hymn. In reality, however, it happened, and it generated wealth. We simply had to manage it. The very origins of the political tradition from which I come and which I represent lay in the wealth generated by industrialisation. The squalor and inequality of our cities meant that we had to organise and to use democracy and the state locally and nationally to ensure that the wealth generated by industrialisation could be shared to uplift all the people. The same challenge faces us today over the wealth being generated by globalisation. The difference is that the challenge is world wide.

Massive new wealth is being generated, but one in five humans live in abject poverty. The challenge before our generation is to ensure that wealth is used to lift up that fifth of humanity by establishing basic, decent standards for all. The wealth gives us an opportunity.

To those of my hon. Friends who doubt that, I must say that I understand their worry about the rapid change that is taking place, but I plead with them to look at reality. The fastest reduction of poverty for the largest number of people in the whole of human history has resulted from rapid economic growth in east Asia over the past 30 years. That happened because inward investment was attracted from multinational capital, which brings with it knowledge and technology. That is how we must harness those things: by attracting investment to create opportunities to export and trade that will grow economies rapidly. That lifts up poor people as well as providing for investment in the education of the people.

There were some deficiencies in how that happened—corruption among them—which led to the east Asian collapse. There are defects in the model, but properly organised trade and investment are major instruments for massively reducing poverty in the world. Our role is to shape them to achieve our objective. For my hon. Friends on the left, I must add that history also shows what happened when the world last went in for protectionism. In trying to protect economies from change, the world threw itself into a terrible recession and depression that created fascism and world war.

The general agreement on tariffs and trade was born out of that experience as we tried to link the world together, opening trade to build a better future. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry tells me that the first of the nine rounds of talks—organised, of course, by a Labour Government—was the Torquay round.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Should not a distinction be made on where free trade should take place? Countries such as those in Africa obviously need free trade into the western world, and the developments in the European Union of which we have heard are very welcome. But such countries sometimes need to protect themselves against trade coming from western countries that would destroy their economies without allowing them to build up. They need buffer agreements so that they can work together on the sale of cocoa and coffee—the equivalent of the operations of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries. That way, they could sell their products better within the western world. It is not a matter of being against free trade; the argument is about where it is appropriate, and about protection for the third world.

Clare Short: History says that my hon. Friend's thesis, which is reasonable in itself, is not right. Many African countries tried to develop behind protectionist barriers. They had very inefficient, expensive and highly subsidised local industries and they paid lousy prices for local crops to the very poor people in their rural areas. Their economies did not grow, but their population grew and poverty grew invincibly. Those who point to that sort of failure and say that it is a result of free trade are misreading economics and history.

Member countries need to discuss these issues more and to take our publics with us, because many people have become genuinely confused. We need to go back over our history to see what it teaches us.

The failure in Seattle was partly due to the success of the World Trade Organisation, which is only five years old. Ironically, that was the first time that trade talks have been attacked. The WTO is the most democratic body that ever met to try to reach agreement on trade in the world. The general agreement on tariffs and trade was always dominated by the big, rich countries; the WTO is a rules-based membership organisation.

To those of my hon. Friends who say that the WTO is against the interests of the third world, I say, "Please do not be so arrogant as to tell the third world what is in its interests when country by country has chosen to join." Those countries obviously have decided that it is in their interests. Surely we should respect and honour their opinion and their judgment about their own interests.

We went from a sophisticated, rich-country dominated GATT to the WTO with 135 members and 31 more waiting to join. The procedures did not cope. There was a terrible delay in the appointment of the new director-general, which meant that he did not have time to prepare for the round particularly well. There are major lessons to be learned about the procedures. We must open the organisation up and think about how it can work. It must work by consensus. All the international environmental agreements and so forth must be reached by consensus. We have to get all the countries in the world to agree to move forward, or we cannot do so. We do not have a parliament of the world, which says that we can do all this by majority vote. Therefore it is difficult.

We can have better procedures that help to include people. We can make the process more transparent and debate more thoroughly the preparatory processes in each country, so that Governments arrive at the talks with a more advanced and developed agenda. We need massively more capacity-building for developing countries. However, we have to proceed by consensus—that is the only way.

To those of my hon. Friends who talk as though we are going backwards, I point out that 30 years ago one in four children in the world died before the age of five, but now it is one in 10—even that is disgraceful and we need to make more progress, but it is not true to say that we are going backwards. Thirty years ago, average life expectancy in developing countries was less than 40 and it is now in the 60s.

We need more. We are getting more wealth and we could share it more rapidly. We could have a period of great uplift for the poor of the world. It is not true to say that we have been going backwards; it is a false account of what has been happening.

Because we agree on some of the fundamentals on trade, the hon. Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) and for South-West Devon ended up saying that Britain should have fixed it all. We are a pretty good Government and we got a lot of respect in Seattle. We were all there talking to developing countries, talking about the environment and talking to our own non-governmental organisations—I can assure the House that no one was having fun in Seattle and we did not go there for a freebie—but even we cannot make all 135 countries in the WTO, including the United States of America just before an election, do our bidding just like that. We are honoured by the deep respect that those on the Opposition Front Bench obviously have for us, but even we are not capable of quite as much as they appear to think.

Everyone agrees with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) that the people of the world want co-operation and security. We have to use

[Clare Short]

democracy world wide—we have more democracy than humanity has ever had—to manage globalisation and not to turn out backs on it. My right hon. Friend, however, is turning his back on globalisation. If we do that, we shall not be able to manage it—it will manage us. It will rip through the world, creating more inequality and injustice—troubles that will lead to even more war, conflict and environmental degradation.

Mr. Tony Benn: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Clare Short: I apologise to my right hon. Friend, but if I give way I shall run out of time and I want to respond to as many contributions as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) spoke about the environment. Too many people want the WTO to make environmental agreements. That is wrong. The organisation does not have the expertise; it is not the place to make such agreements. We need complete mutual recognition. All the countries in the world have reached environmental agreements; they believe in them and want them to be honoured. The adjudication and disputes settlement procedures of the WTO must never be able to call those agreements into question. That was one of our objectives at Seattle—I think that it is achievable.

My hon. Friend referred to the precautionary principle. Many people argue that, because there is agreement on the use of science-based controls and the use of precautionary science, the principle is already incorporated in the WTO rules. However, we want to clarify that matter. Another aspect is voluntary labelling. It is funny that all the anarchists suddenly want the state to control what everyone can consume. If we are worried about genetic modification or hormones in beef, labelling allows consumers to be in charge. Although it is clear that WTO rules allow voluntary labelling, the matter needs further clarification. We wanted to include that on the agenda for the meeting.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) made an extremely important point. If the WTO fails, the big economies will settle things on their own, and the developing countries will be squeezed out. Do all those who celebrate a weakening of the WTO really want less democratically accountable rules on the organisation of world trade in all the countries of the world—including the poorest ones? That is a real danger.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) talked about the problem of banana production in the eastern Caribbean. We all share her concern for that region, but its Governments joined the WTO because they decided that it was in their interest to do so. The settlement of the dispute on bananas did not state that special arrangements could not be made. Particular arrangements were called into question, but we hope to reach an agreement that provides protection for the Caribbean growers while giving them time to diversity.

The Caribbean is a very beautiful region whose people could concentrate on eco-tourism—I agree with the hon. Member for South-West Devon—because Caribbean bananas are massively more expensive than those on the world market. That industry is an extremely fragile one on which to build the area's economy for ever. We need to protect those people and help them to diversify so that their economies can progress.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry). Labour standards are of crucial importance, but why are the demonstrations not held outside the World Bank? That is the world's development organisation. Why cannot the World Bank work alongside the International Labour Organisation, with a systematic policy in every country to ensure that every child goes to school and that their parents' incomes are high enough to obviate the need for child labour? Why should the matter involve only the WTO? Is it because people want to use trade sanctions only? That would punish countries for their poverty and would trap their children in endless poverty.

I point out to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) that only 5 per cent. of child labour goes on in trade; the rest is in the agriculture, mining and domestic sectors, which trade sanctions could not touch. If we really care about child labour and respect for core labour standards, we should use all the instruments of the international system. To focus only on the WTO is to concentrate on sanctions—that is the wrong way to deal with the problem.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) is worried about genetically modified organisms and bio-safety. Commissioner Lamy suggested that the WTO should discuss GMOs. The General Affairs Council of the EU and the EU politicians at Seattle met continuously to tell him what he was allowed to do. We discussed how we could achieve flexibility in the negotiations. It is not true that there was no accountability to politicians; we told him firmly that he was not allowed to discuss GMOs, and he withdrew that suggestion.

On GMOs, voluntary labelling is the immediate way forward. We have it in this country. It has not been challenged under the WTO procedures. Unfortunately, I do not have time to answer all the important arguments that have been made, but I wish to expose the myth about the patenting of genes. On patenting, the WTO rules are simply that each country should put in place a patenting system according to some basic rules of its own. There is no mutual recognition of patents, and it is only possible to patent new knowledge. It is a myth that all the indigenous culture and crops of the people of the world have been ripped away from them by the World Trade Organisation. I am sorry that I cannot do justice to the complexity of the issue in the time available.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) spoke about drugs and AIDS. The very expensive anti-retroviral drugs that cost about £80 a month, and that slow down death once one has the HIV infection, are relevant only to the elite of Africa. In Africa, there are people dying of AIDS who do not have soap, water or enough to eat. We must do much more, in Africa and elsewhere, to prevent the spread of the infection. Uganda has shown that that is achievable. We need more help with the opportunistic infections that infect people with AIDS, and drugs are needed for that. As my hon. Friend said, under the WTO rules there is room to ensure that those drugs are made available. We must ensure that that is done.

I strongly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) that the opportunity of globalisation is an opportunity to globalise prosperity. That is the task, and this is a real opportunity. We could waste it, but if we focus on that objective and ensure that all the new wealth that is being generated is used in a way that lifts up the one in five of humanity who live in abject poverty, that would be an enormous advance for humanity. It is a possibility, and that is the challenge.

Where do we go from here? In the new year, work will continue in Geneva on the World Trade Organisation's built-in agenda, set during the Uruguay round, and a work programme decided at the Singapore and Geneva ministerial meetings in 1996 and 1998. That includes the start of negotiations on agriculture, and as the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon said, that is permitted and bound; but even more significantly, the peace clause on not challenging agricultural subsidies under WTO rules falls in 2003, so there must be major progress, and it will come. It will bring benefits to some developing countries, but only to a small number. Services are also bound. It is also agreed that there will be reviews of agreements on trade in intellectual property, trade-related investment measures and disputes settlement.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will lead a strong effort to reform the procedures of, and to open up and make transparent, the World Trade Organisation. He is very strongly committed to that. We hope and intend that we shall move on from that. Let us hope that, when we get past the election in one of our friendly countries, we can get on with another round.

I repeat to many of my hon. Friends that South Africa very much favours a broad round because it sees the benefits that can come to Africa from advances of the type that we have been advocating. I do not agree with the hon. Member for South–West Devon that we are being too ambitious to be broad. It is necessary to be broad enough to get the trade-offs so that everyone gets something and agreement is reached. Of course, ambitions usually exceed results, but those who are too narrow will get no trade-offs, so there will be no agreement.

South Africa suggested that negotiations might be conducted in two stages. We could go forward on the built-in agenda and implementation of the Uruguay round, which has been very difficult for many developing countries in need of more help. Then we could have a period of capacity-building and return to investment, competition and some of the other issues in a second stage of the next round. That is a very useful suggestion.

I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues. It worries me greatly that some very good young people throughout the world, who think that they care about poverty and injustice, are advocating policies that would damage the interests of the poorest people of the world. We must all stand firm by managing trade in a way that improves people's lives. It is achievable, as I have said, and we can respect labour standards, environmental standards and all the other things that we hold key—but not by destroying the World Trade Organisation. We can do so by making it work in a more sophisticated way and strengthening the implementation of our other international agreements.

I shall return to the some of the points that I failed to answer. I was asked whether we should use the International Monetary Fund model. The answer is no. That is a dollar a vote; we need a country a vote. The same applies to the role of the Security Council. We must have consensus in all countries with a need for growth—

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed without Question put.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Ordered,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 37, before the word "European" insert the words "Environmental Audit Committee or with the".

Line 46, before the word "European" insert the words "Environmental Audit Committee or with the".

Line 48, at the end, insert the words:—

"(4A) Notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two."—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

FISHERIES

Motion made, and Question put,

That the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum, submitted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 5th December 1999, relating to the fixing of fishing opportunities for 2000 and certain conditions under which they may be fished, shall not stand referred to European Standing Committee A.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put,

That, at the sitting on Monday 13th December, the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) shall not apply to any proceedings on the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to fisheries, and the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of those proceedings not later than Seven o'clock, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Considered what day?

Mr. Don Touhig (Islwyn): Monday next.

CONSOLIDATED FUND BILL

Motion made, and Question put,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, any Consolidated Fund Bill ordered to be brought in and read the first time shall be proceeded with as if the Second Reading thereof stood as an Order of the day, and Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills) shall apply.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any messages from the Lords shall have been received.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Forestry Commission Land

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

7 pm

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): I am grateful to have the opportunity to raise an important matter on the Adjournment.

Much of Monmouthshire is forest land which forms part of the Forestry Commission estate. The Hendre, Tintern, Wentwood and Chepstow Park forests are some of the superb forests in my constituency. Arguably, at this time of year—the late autumn—Monmouthshire is at its most beautiful. Many travel to New England to see that part of America in the fall. They need not go that far; they could come to Monmouthshire and see it in the fall.

Part of my constituency lies in the Wye valley area of outstanding natural beauty and it has special designation. It was therefore with utter astonishment that, a few weeks ago, I studied a fax of the particulars of sale of 812 acres of Chepstow Park wood by Forest Enterprise. It was marketed by a Sussex-based agent, Fleury Manico. The particulars of sale stated:

"Freehold for Sale—Major Leisure Opportunity—May be suitable for Holiday Village Operation—Our clients"—

that is Forest Enterprise—

"are seeking to dispose of their freehold interest in this site with full vacant possession to be given upon completion. Our client is not obliged to accept the highest, or indeed any offer received."

Bids were to be received by noon on 22 October, just 10 days after I and many of my constituents had seen the particulars of sale. The site, it was stated, was within two hours' travel time of 10 million people.

That was the first time that I had heard of Forest Enterprise's intention to sell off the wood, a major area of my constituency. Apparently, it had been approached by a major holiday operator, but I do not know which operator that was. I checked with the director of planning and economic development at Monmouthshire county council and it was apparent that the local authority had received no notification. The Wye valley AONB officer said that he had heard rumours, but that he had not been notified by Forest Enterprise. Local community councils had received no notification, and the National Assembly for Wales had apparently received no notification.

It was incredible that a public body proposed to sell publicly owned forestry without any public consultation or even notification to public bodies. The sale was advertised in two professional journals, *Estates Gazette* and "Leisure Monthly". Further, Forest Enterprise seemed to be employing a sealed-bid method of sale that raised suspicions that the sale was being rushed through with a preferred developer in mind. I therefore tabled an early-day motion that drew attention to the "secretive and underhand" method of sale. However, I have spoken to the director of Forest Enterprise and I am happy to accept that that was not its intention.

The failure to notify me as the local Member of Parliament was impolite; the failure to notify the local authority was inept; but the failure to make any effort to notify the residents who live in the vicinity of Chepstow Park wood—in the beautiful villages of Itton, Devauden and St. Arvans as well as in the town of Chepstow—was

inexcusable. Not surprisingly the residents came in their hundreds to a public meeting in Itton village hall to express their concern and anger at the proposed sale and method of sale. They had bought properties in an AONB which they believed had been given special protection.

My constituents are incensed at repeated attempts to sell their countryside, because it is within two hours' travel of 10 million people. I have joined them in objecting to other grandiose schemes that have been promoted by developers; for example, the Severnside international airport scheme and the Legend Court theme park. I shall now support their opposition to the proposed sale of Chepstow Park wood for a holiday development which would require a perimeter fence, deny access and destroy the fauna and flora of the wood.

We want to attract people to that part of Monmouthshire to stay at local hotels and guest houses, but it is felt that a holiday village operation would deny people that opportunity.

The campaign has united the political parties in opposition to the sale. I shared a platform at the public meeting with the local Assembly Member and local county councillors, including the leader of the council, Councillor White, who assured the meeting that he would fight tooth and nail on behalf of local residents.

There was unanimous opposition to the sale, and the "Save Our Wood" campaign was formed. It has organised a petition that has already attracted 5,000 signatures and messages of support from conservation groups and individuals throughout the country. I pay tribute to Mr. Ken Futcher and other members of "Save Our Wood" for their effective, rational and decent campaign.

I fully share constituents' concerns about the sale of the wood in principle, but I am concerned also about the manner in which the process has been conducted: the failure to consult or even notify local public bodies; the failure to advertise the sale locally; the brief period for the receipt of offers; the sealed bid method of sale, and the lack of any consideration given to local people purchasing the freehold to establish a trust to keep the wood as a local amenity.

Chepstow town council has complained to the National Audit Office that Forest Enterprise has

"acted totally against the public interest in this matter and negated its public duty."

Welsh Assembly Member, David Davies, has referred the matter to Counsel General in the National Assembly for Wales.

In letters to me, the chief executive of Forest Enterprise has stated that

"what is for sale at present is the exclusive option to take forward a planning application and . . . the advertisement in the *Estates Gazette* may have misled the point."

The chief executive of Forest Enterprise and the director for Wales have replied in detail to letters that I have written to them. I would like to express my appreciation to them for attending a meeting in my constituency to discuss the issues and clarify certain points.

From those contacts, it has transpired that Forest Enterprise acknowledges that it did not notify key bodies about the decision to sell and that there was no discussion about the proposed sale with the Welsh Assembly Secretary, Christine Gwyther, or the Assembly's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee. Forest Enterprise acknowledges also that two bids have been received, including one from the developers who had made the initial contact.

Forest Enterprise acknowledges that it would have to assess the suitability of any private developers before agreeing to the sale of an option to purchase, and that it considers that the planning process may be a suitable forum for public consultation. It assured us that the wood would not be sold unless planning permission were granted, and Forest Enterprise would remain neutral during the planning process. Fortunately, we were assured that no irrevocable decisions have been taken and that it would agree to a period of several months to allow public representation to be made and to seek the local authority's views.

I shall respond to Forest Enterprise's points. I do not accept that the planning system is an appropriate forum for public consultation or that Forest Enterprise could remain neutral during the process, because it facilitated the sale and stands to make a considerable capital receipt from the scheme's success.

The planning authority could well refuse planning permission and the applicant could appeal to the National Assembly's planning appeals system. The developers have a right of appeal if the application is refused, but the citizens and local community do not have a right of appeal if it is granted. Although I am satisfied that Monmouthshire county council would not support such a planning application, I cannot prejudge such a decision.

I am grateful that the assistant director of planning, Mr. Ashworth, has stated that a large-scale tourist development within the AONB would not be in accord with the unitary development plan policies, so a planning application for such a development would probably be refused.

To their credit, the Government have changed the policy from that of the previous Conservative Government and put a stop to the sale of large-scale forest land. In reply to a parliamentary question this week, my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary states:

"We have stopped large scale sales of forest land by the Forestry Commission. Our policy is that the Commission may only sell agricultural land, land associated with houses and other buildings, unplantable land and relatively small and isolated blocks of forest land which do not make a significant contribution to its objectives and which are surplus to its requirements."—[*Official Report*, 7 December 1999; Vol. 340, c.527W.]

None of those conditions applied to Chepstow Park wood. However, there is a get-out clause: the commission may also sell areas for development where that is in the public interest.

Forest Enterprise states that it must consider a developer's inquiry where it deems it to be in "the public interest", but how can the public interest be assessed if there is no consultation with local authorities, those in the AONB or the Welsh Assembly? Public interest cannot be synonymous with the Exchequer's or developer's interest.

I accept that forestry locations can be developed as potential holiday operations, and such operations may be welcomed in many areas, especially in Wales, but surely the starting point should be a strategy for the environment, economic development and tourism, which would involve collaboration on all fronts with the National Assembly. Only then should consideration be given to interest from potential developers.

[Mr. Huw Edwards]

I have written to the First Secretary of the National Assembly about the matter. I understand that there were no discussions with Forest Enterprise prior to the advertisement for the sale of the freehold of Chepstow Park wood. I have asked for clarification of whether the policy adopted for Chepstow Park wood would be applied equally to other Forestry Commission land in Wales.

Chepstow Park wood lies in the Wye valley area of outstanding natural beauty, to which Parliament has given a special designation. It is stated:

"The primary purpose of ANOB designation is to conserve natural beauty and account should be taken of the need to safeguard agriculture, forestry and of the economic and social needs of local communities."

The Government's intention is to strengthen the position of designated AONBs, and that will be greatly welcomed in my constituency.

According to the woodland trust, Chepstow Park wood is an ancient woodland site and appears as such in the ancient woodland inventory. Only 31,000 hectares of ancient woodland remain in Wales, and at 331 hectares, Chepstow Park wood is one of only three planted ancient woodland sites in Wales that exceeds 300 hectares.

According to Gwent wildlife trust,

"this forest is one of the significantly wooded areas in Gwent and is of value as a relatively undisturbed habitat for wildlife and as an undeveloped area of open space, which is of significant landscape value.

Chepstow Park wood is an ancient woodland site which lies within the Wye valley area of outstanding natural beauty and is therefore of significant historic and amenity value."

One constituent, Mrs. Attley from Devauden, wrote to me:

"The woods themselves are a constant reminder of how long it takes for something truly beautiful and natural to be created and how easy and quick it is to destroy it for ever. We have brought up our children in this area and have ridden our horses and walked with our dogs in these . . . woods for many years and we have great respect for this spectacular place in which we are lucky enough to live."

I implore my hon. Friend the Minister, in collaboration with the Welsh Assembly Secretaries, to intervene to instruct Forest Enterprise that its decision to sell Chepstow Park wood is contrary to Government policy, contrary to the moratorium on the sale of large-scale forest, and contrary to the Government's commitments to promote biodiversity and sustainability and to provide greater public access to the countryside. I assure the House that I shall give my constituents the fullest support in opposing any attempt to take Chepstow Park wood out of the public domain.

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards), particularly on the case that he has made so powerfully for the wood in his constituency. As someone who has been to his constituency, I can confirm what a beautiful area it is. I quite understand why he is so anxious to ensure that it is not spoilt and why he is so keen to work with his constituents to raise the issue. I assure him that the issue of Chepstow Park wood is now well known at the very highest levels of the Forestry Commission. He has certainly had great success in raising the issue and making his concerns clear.

I am very happy to communicate those concerns to both the Forestry Commission and Christine Gwyther—as my hon. Friend rightly said, forestry management has been devolved. Decisions on Chepstow Park wood are therefore ones for the forestry management strategies of the Welsh Assembly.

I recognise the case that my hon. Friend makes, and I shall be pleased to go through the Government's policy on the disposal of Forestry Commission woods. I shall try to address my hon. Friend's concerns and take them into account.

As my hon. Friend rightly says, the Government stopped the large-scale disposal of Forestry Commission land. That was a manifesto commitment, and I am pleased that the Treasury made financial assistance available to the Forestry Commission, because the previous Government had worked on the assumption that the commission would raise a great deal of its income from forthcoming sales. That hole in the commission's budget therefore had to be plugged.

The Forestry Commission was, in effect, undergoing a process of back-door privatisation, which I do not believe the private or the public sector wanted. Accordingly, we have given the Forestry Commission a new policy on the sale of land, and I shall take my hon. Friend through it.

The Forestry Commission's objectives are to protect and expand Britain's forests and woodlands, and to increase their value to society and the environment—not just their financial value, but their value for people, wildlife and the future, as my hon. Friend noted.

The previous Government's policy was to reduce the size of the commission's estate. During the time of the Conservative Government, the commission sold 36,000 hectares of forest in England, about 15 per cent. of its total forest estate. We do not have such a policy and we have stopped large-scale sales.

The Forestry Commission manages a large and valuable estate, some parts of which are ancient and special, such as the New Forest. Other parts of the estate may be of less direct value to the Government, the community and the commission. For example, some parts are farmland let to tenant farmers, and some are isolated blocks of commercial forestry that are expensive and difficult to manage.

Like any large landowner, the Forestry Commission needs to be able to buy and sell land in order to manage its estate efficiently and meet its objectives. It may make sense to sell an isolated block of woodland, if the money raised can be used to acquire another area that can be opened up to the public or that has high conservation value.

We have not imposed a complete moratorium on the commission buying and selling land for the purposes of estate management. Some woodland is leasehold and does not have public access. As part of our commitment to increase public access, we have no problem with the commission selling off one block of woodland to which there is no access, and using the money to buy another block of woodland that can be opened to the public.

Parts of the estate, such as the New Forest and the Forest of Dean, will never be sold, so the commission does not have carte blanche to sell what it wants.

The commission may sell agricultural land. In the past, the commission has bought large areas of land for afforestation, but parts have been retained in agriculture. Where those are managed on agricultural tenancies, we have no objection to the commission selling them to the sitting tenants.

The Forestry Commission may sell unplantable land. The commission does not need to retain ownership of areas that are unsuitable for planting, perhaps because they are too high up the hill. Those areas are often let to farmers for grazing, and they can be sold. Other areas, such as wet areas, may be of great conservation value, and may be sold to conservation bodies to be managed as nature reserves.

Assets such as houses and buildings that may be surplus to requirements may be sold. There may also be small blocks of isolated land that do not make a contribution to the overall objectives and are surplus to requirements. They, too, can be sold. Thus there is a range of woods that can be put on the market, and the money used as part of the aims outlined in the English forestry strategy.

When small woods are considered for sale, we are keen that local people should have the opportunity, if they wish, to buy those woods. We have encouraged local trusts to take over small areas of woodland that are important to local people. Other organisations have also bought parts of woodland for public enjoyment and recreation. I am keen for people to have that opportunity.

Mr. Edwards: Does my hon. Friend accept that such a purchase to create a trust is almost impossible if there is no local advertisement and if the advertisement is directed only at major developers?

Mr. Morley: I understand my hon. Friend's point. As he said, the Chepstow Park wood proposal must go through planning procedures. It is unlikely to be sold for development unless planning permission is granted.

As a general principle, I am in favour of giving local people and organisations the opportunity to bid for woodland that is to be sold. Although I cannot comment on Welsh policy and the actions of the Welsh Assembly, we may need to consider an overall strategy to ensure that local people are not denied an opportunity to make a bid if they want to do that. I shall be happy to discuss that with the Forestry Commission.

The Forestry Commission has a good record in involvement with community forests—for example, Thames Chase and Red Rose forest in the north-west. Overall, we have set the Forestry Commission a sensible long-term policy on sales and acquisitions. It allows the Forestry Commission the flexibility to manage woods efficiently and to dispose of and acquire woodland and land as part of its policy of maintaining core public woodland, which people throughout the country value so highly.

As my hon. Friend said, he knows the policy—he has tabled questions to me about it—and he knows that it does not apply to Chepstow Park wood. He rightly said that we should consider the question of selling forests in the public interest. Chepstow Park wood falls into that category. There is a demand for high quality country holidays in Britain. Several self-contained holiday villages have been built in attractive rural areas—often sensitively—and have proved to be popular. They encourage many people who do not normally go to the woods to get out there. They enhance the local economy and create many new jobs, which are especially welcome in rural areas.

When considering such schemes, the views of local people must be taken into account. Some developments mean that people who used to enjoy a particular wood can no longer do that, or that their enjoyment is restricted. In some cases, planning conditions specify the creation of an equivalent amount of woodland by the developers. Planners can consider that.

When considering a planning application, local authorities will consult widely and in detail. That means that my hon. Friend and his constituents will be able to make representations as part of the planning procedures, which are designed to allow them to do that. It has been made clear to my hon. Friend that the Forestry Commission has a neutral role. The planning authorities will decide whether Chepstow Park wood is suitable for development.

My hon. Friend made some important points. First and foremost, he represented the views of his constituents effectively. He referred to areas of outstanding natural beauty and how they should fit in with the sort of development that we are considering. He mentioned disposal policies and questioned whether the provision for giving local people a chance to make bids is sufficient. He also raised the planning of such schemes, the most appropriate way for people to make representations and the role of the Forestry Commission and the Welsh Assembly in the democratic process. They are important issues and I believe that he will have the opportunity to make those representations as part of that process.

My hon. Friend raised important issues about disposal policy that are worthy of further consideration and I can certainly give him the assurance that I shall hold discussions with the Forestry Commission and Christine Gwyther, who has ministerial responsibility for them in the Welsh Assembly. His views have been well put—he has made his case succinctly—and I shall ensure that they are passed on to the appropriate bodies and in the appropriate places.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-five minutes past Seven o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 30 November 1999

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Palestinian Refugees

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10 am

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As there has been some uncertainty, can you confirm that contributions to the debate should be made from a standing position and that the switches on the microphones are inoperative because the microphones are operated automatically, so we do not need to touch them?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I can confirm that and I hope that everything will work smoothly. Hon. Members should rise in their place, as usual, and they will be heard by all who need to hear them.

10.1 am

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): It is a privilege to be making history by introducing the first debate in this new parallel Chamber. It is a pleasure to see that we have already established a new tradition of hon. Members sitting where they please and not in accordance with their political party.

It is a particular pleasure to me, as a former member of the Modernisation Committee and a signatory to the report that recommended the parallel Chamber, to have been chosen to speak in the first debate. It is fitting that my constituency of Milton Keynes is to be associated for ever with innovation and modernisation.

The subject of our debate is Palestinian refugees. The debate is timely because the issue is one of the most difficult to be resolved during the current final status negotiations in the middle east peace process. Both sides to the negotiations started from heavily entrenched positions. The Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, has said that there can be no return of the refugees, but neither President Arafat nor any other Palestinian leader would be allowed to sign away the Palestinian right to return, given that 70 per cent. of Palestinians are refugees.

The refugee problem is not minor. Palestinians comprise the largest single group of refugees in the world, and one of the oldest. There are 3.6 million Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations, a figure that has grown from 914,000 in 1950 when the United Nations Relief and Works Agency was established. That population is growing by 3 per cent. a year. Under UNRWA's operational definition,

"Palestinian refugees are persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict, and who took refuge in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Jordanian-ruled West Bank or the Egyptian-administered Gaza Strip."

Contrary to the Israeli position, UNRWA also

"covers the descendants of persons who became refugees in 1948."

In addition to registered refugees, an estimated 1 million other Palestinians are unregistered refugees. That includes the 850,000 who represent those displaced in 1967 and their descendants. The number has been augmented by the actions of the Israeli Government in confiscating the identity cards of Palestinian Jerusalemites, effectively deporting them. More than 2,000 Palestinians were deported in that way between 1996 and 1998 alone. In all, 70 per cent. of Palestinians remain in exile against their will.

Most of the refugees are in the immediate area of Palestine. According to UNRWA, one third of registered Palestinian refugees—around 1.1 million—live in 59 recognised refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the west bank and Gaza. The majority of the remainder live in and around the cities of the area. For example, the majority of Palestinian refugees from west Jerusalem still live within 20 miles of their stolen property. That demonstrates the way in which the refugee problem is tied up with the question of Jerusalem and its borders.

There are even refugees living inside Israel. They are internal refugees who fled from their villages and found themselves still within the boundaries of the Jewish state after the cessation of hostilities. Today, they make up a large proportion of the 120,000-strong population of the so-called unrecognised villages—unrecognised in that, although the villages are within Israel, most of them are denied access to municipal services, including running water, electricity, education and health services. It is important that the fate of the internal refugees is not ignored, and that their rights are recognised.

What are the rights of the refugees? International law is clear. The refugees are entitled to return to their homes and entitled to compensation. UN resolution 194, which has been reaffirmed 110 times since 1948, and which even the United States supported in 1993, states clearly in relation to the Palestinians:

"the General Assembly resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of, or damage to, property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the governments or authorities responsible."

Further legal support is given through article XIII of the universal declaration of human rights, through the convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination, in which articles 2 and 5d guarantee the right of refugees to return, and through the international covenant on civil and political rights. The right of private ownership—most of the refugees owned land or other property—applies regardless of changes in sovereignty or nationality, and cannot be negotiated away by any government.

Some have sought to suggest that the refugees have forgone their rights, alleging that they left voluntarily in 1948 at the behest of surrounding Arab countries. However, there is a considerable body of evidence, now backed up by Israeli historians such as Benny Morris, Illan Pappé and others, that shows that there was a concerted and deliberate effort to expel Palestinians. Massacres such as that at Deir Yassin are well

[Dr. Phyllis Starkey]

documented. Of the 726,000 refugees in 1948, 52 per cent. had been expelled or fled before the Arab forces entered Palestine in May 1948, and 213 villages and towns including Jaffa, Tiberias, Safad, Beisan and Acre had been forcibly depopulated.

Many of the areas attacked by Jewish forces before May 1948 were outside the area proposed under partition for the Jewish state. Why people fled is, in any case, irrelevant. As in Kosovo and Chechnya today, people flee any theatre of war. As far as international law is concerned, it matters not why a person has left. That person cannot be denied the right to return to his or her home. Legally, the Palestinians have a right of return that cannot be denied.

However, anyone who has visited Palestinian refugee camps and spoken to refugees cannot be in any doubt about their strong and abiding desire to return. A couple of years ago, in a refugee camp in Gaza, I spoke to a woman who lived with her family of four other adults and six grandchildren in five rooms. She had come from Hebron in 1948, still regarded Hebron as her home and longed to return. In the camps, people retain their community links with refugees from the same village or town. Marriages are arranged within those extended village communities, re-creating within the camps a network of virtual Palestinian villages. Over and over again, people show the key to their house, or the title deeds to their property in Palestine. The children, although born in Syria or Jordan, describe in loving detail the topography of family homes that they have never seen—family homes now expropriated and lived in by others.

The sense of injustice among refugees is fuelled by the appalling conditions in which many live. Most camps are desperately overcrowded, with extended families living in breeze-block dwellings that are far too small and often do not have proper sewerage or clean water. In Beach camp in the Gaza strip, more than 71,000 Palestinian refugees live in three quarters of a square kilometre. Children in the camps have nowhere to play but in the sand; by the age of four, 85 per cent. are infected with roundworm. In schools, double—or even treble—shifts for teachers and pupils are the norm. Unemployment is rife, and the refugees, unlike Gazan residents with Palestinian citizenship, cannot legally travel into Israel to seek employment.

The refugees in Lebanon have suffered especially badly. Many were killed during the civil war in Lebanon, and others continue to live there under frequent Israeli bombardment. The refugees' presence in Lebanon is unwelcome to the Lebanese, who are concerned about the destabilising effect that they have had, and may continue to have, on the complex communal politics of Lebanon. In Syria, and especially in Jordan, the refugees' situation is better, but their desire to return home is still strong.

The refugees' right to return is incontrovertible, and the rights of the 1967 refugees, at least, were recognised by Israel in the Oslo agreement. However, that raises the question whether it is feasible for them to return. Is there sufficient land? Currently, more than 80 per cent. of the Jewish population live in 15 per cent. of Israel. The remainder, including most of the extreme religious settler groups, live on relatively large areas of rural land and the population density is very low. Whereas Palestinian refugees in the Gaza strip live on land with a population of 4,000 people per square kilometre, their kibbutz neighbours across the fence enjoy density levels of three people per square kilometre—that is, more than 1,000 times fewer people per square kilometre.

Israel is used to accommodating large numbers of immigrants. During the 1990s, the number of Jewish immigrants from Russia alone roughly equalled the total number of refugees in the Gaza strip and Lebanon. Since the beginning of the waves of immigration from the former Soviet Union in 1989, more than 770,000 immigrants have emigrated from there to Israel out of a total of more than 900,000 during that period. That process of immigration to Israel is continuing. Furthermore, the Israeli law of return allows for the immigration of non-Jews related by marriage or birth, including grandchildren. No one in Israel has suggested that there was not enough room to accommodate those people, yet it is now suggested that the land cannot accommodate returning Palestinians.

If Israel attempts to deny the right of return of refugees from Jaffa, Nazareth or Galilee to their homes in Israel, it presumably expects them to go to the future Palestinian state. However, the current Palestinian-controlled areas are already densely populated. If a future Palestinian state is to become the home of the refugees, it should include at least the entire west bank and Gaza strip—that is, 23 per cent. of what was formerly mandate Palestine. The best offer so far, which came from the left of the governing Israeli Labour party, would mean that only 70 per cent. of the west bank was in Palestinian hands—that is, 16 per cent. of what was formerly Palestine.

The issues of land, refugees, Jewish settlements and Jerusalem are being negotiated bilaterally between Israel and the Palestine National Authority. However, those negotiating partners are very unequal in terms of power, and the details of the final agreement should also concern us in the United Kingdom. Apart from the fact that we have historic links with Israel and Palestine, we will, as members of the European Union, be expected—with the United States of America—to fund whatever agreement is made. The EU is already the largest donor of development aid to the Palestinian authority. We have an interest in ensuring that any agreement is sustainable.

If the refugee issue remains unresolved, it will become a time bomb. Millions of people, over 50 per cent. of whom are children, will lose all hope of ever being able to escape from the appalling conditions of the camps. That will surely be a fertile breeding ground for extremism, spawning even greater problems in the years to come. That cannot be in our interest, or in Israel's interest.

The threat to Israel does not lie in a Palestinian right of return. The far greater threat lies in not allowing a right of return, and not acknowledging the injustice that befell the refugees. President Clinton said in July:

> "I would like it if the Palestinian people felt free and were more free to live wherever they like, wherever they want to live."

Without a right of return, that will not be realised.

I hope that the Minister will today reconfirm the British Government's view on the right of return and compensation of Palestinian refugees under

international law, including UN General Assembly resolution 194. Compensation for damage or loss of property and for the anguish of the past 51 years must, in justice, be provided. If a refugee chooses not to return, compensation for land must also be included. Recognition of the refugees' rights must not be made contingent on the recognition of the rights of others. Just as the payment of compensation by Germany for the property of Jewish victims of the Nazis cannot and should not be made contingent on Israel's paying compensation to the Palestinians, the Palestinians' right to compensation cannot be made contingent on payments to Jews who fled from other Arab countries.

Who should fund the compensation, and the resettlement costs of those refugees who choose to return? Clearly, Israel should contribute, as it has benefited, over the years, from the confiscated property and land. For example, the land that Israel confiscated and leased to kibbutzim—a quarter of the state of Israel, on which fewer than 3 per cent. of Israelis live—is about to be privatised. Its value is estimated at between $50 billion and $60 billion, which could fund some of the compensation.

The international community also has a responsibility, and I should like to ask the Minister whether the Government are pressing that point in the European Union and with the United States of America. There is a real window of opportunity for peace in the middle east. People of good faith in the Israeli Government and the Palestine National Authority genuinely want a solution that recognises the rights of both peoples to security and prosperity.

The refugees cannot be excluded or bought off by a lump sum of compensation to a Government. We have just fought a war to ensure that the Kosovan refugees could return to their homes, and the Palestinian refugees could reasonably ask why their right to return home appears to be less important. A cynic would say that the lack of mass television coverage of the Palestinian exodus in 1948 is the reason.

I hope that the British Government will ensure that the injustice done to the Palestinians 51 years ago is finally recognised and made good, so that we can start the next millennium with a real and sustainable peace for Israelis and Palestinians. The land that they share is, after all, where the event that marked the start of the first millennium took place.

10.18 am

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) not only on securing the first debate in this welcome modernisation initiative but on her ingenuity in linking her constituency with such innovation, which I am sure that her constituents will appreciate.

The change of Government in Israel has been welcome. The peace process, which was stalled for so long under the previous Government of Israel, is on track once again. It has been relaunched on the principle that always underlay it—land for peace. Inevitably, when international attention is focused on that process, the most commonly discussed issues are the withdrawal from occupied land, security for Israel and the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination in their own land. All those factors are important; indeed, they are vital to the success of any peace process.

However, the Oslo process and countless United Nations resolutions on events in the middle east focus on other issues that must also be addressed if we are to see lasting peace there. That is why I particularly welcome this debate. At the centre of those issues is the question of Palestinian refugees. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West has already talked about United Nations resolution 194, the right of Palestinians to return and their right to compensation. Since that resolution was made, a number of others have raised similar points.

My hon. Friend rightly referred to the scale of the problem, which exists to this day. More than 1 million people still live in 59 camps scattered throughout the west bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. They are overcrowded, neglected and marginalised, and half the refugees are children, who are growing up with an uncertain future. Education and health services in the camps are poor. There is insufficient space for children to play, and many leave school early to find work to help support their families. In the Nahr El Bared camp, in Lebanon, more than 26,000 refugees live within 1.9 square kilometres. In the Balata refugee camp, on the west bank, there are just four UNRWA schools for 3,431 schoolchildren.

A couple of weeks ago, I tabled a question to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development on water resources in the west bank and Gaza. Her answer was most revealing. She said:

"Most water is used for irrigation"

in that area. However,

"A United Nations report from 1990 indicated that the total annual capita consumption for Palestinians in the West Bank was 139 cubic metres, compared to that for settlers of 1,143 cubic metres. Figures for Gaza were 172 cubic metres for Palestinians and 2,326 cubic metres for settlers. Annual per capita consumption in Israel was 411 cubic metres."—[*Official Report*, 10 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. *554*.]

That graphically illustrates what life is like for all Palestinians on the west bank and Gaza, not just refugees, but it is clear that life is worse for those who live in the camps.

Last week, I was fortunate enough to host an exhibition, called Eye to Eye, which was sponsored by the Save the Children Fund, and which took place in the Upper Waiting Hall in this place. That exhibition enables Palestinian children to tell their own story by capturing on film everyday life in the camps. An interactive web site based on their images and stories provides a channel of communication between young Palestinians and children in other countries. During the coming months, the exhibition will tour the middle east and this country; I believe that it will visit Cairo next month, followed by various cities in the UK. I shall place on record the web site address, which is www.savethechildren.org.uk/eyetoeye/.

Let us hope that the exhibition will allow more people to see the circumstances in which Palestinian refugees live, and thereby bring a sense of perspective. It is perhaps all too easy to see the middle east solely in geopolitical terms—as a region dominated by the question of what negotiations are under way and what

[Mr. Richard Burden]

agreements have been reached or are under discussion. In terms of finding a solution to the problem, that is right and understandable. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that the heart of the problem affects real people with real lives here and now.

I first became interested in the situation of the Palestinians in the 1970s. I was then at university and I used to talk to Palestinian students, many of whom came from refugee families. They would talk about what happened to their parents; the older ones would speak about what they could remember of Palestine before 1948. Palestinian students talk now not only of what happened to their parents, but of what happened to their grandparents—the situation has continued for that long. The same families have experienced displacement not just once, but several times.

The principle of the right to return, which my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West mentioned, and the issue of compensation are important. It is also important that not only the international community but Israel comes to terms with what happened in 1948 and with the question of the Palestinian refugees. For Israel to do so would not be to deny the fact that many Israelis have suffered over the past 51 years or that Israeli families have lost loved ones. However, if Israel is to have a secure future, it must come to terms with its past—the bad bits as well as the good. Finding a solution to the plight of Palestinian refugees is an essential part of that process. The existence of Palestinian refugees, and the continuing denial of their rights, is an enduring embodiment of what has gone wrong. It behoves everyone in the international community to do what we can to put that situation right.

Last week, there was a lobby of this place about the Palestinian refugees. I chaired one of the meetings connected with that lobby, at which there was much discussion about initiatives that could be taken. A woman stood up and said that talk was all very well—that there was much talk in the international community and in the House—but that she came from a refugee Palestinian family and that she wanted to know what was going to be done. No easy solution can be magicked out of the air or implemented tomorrow, but after 51 years of the problem we must take on board the fact that we are being asked bluntly what we will do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West made a valid point that, when looking at the rights of refugees and at respect for international law and for United Nations resolutions, the rights of Palestinian refugees should be no less precious to us than the rights of the East Timorese or of those from Kosovo. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will reassure us that the Government stand by what has been stated before about the rights of Palestinian refugees to return and to receive compensation, and that Britain will play an active role in trying to achieve that.

We can contribute to that process on our different levels. I hope that we are doing so by holding this debate and that the Eye to Eye exhibition, which was launched in this place last week and which will tour, will also contribute.

I shall conclude with a quotation from Nadir, from the Nahr El Bared refugee camp in Lebanon, whose words should be heard by us all—they sum up the problem and explain why we must listen. She said:

"No one sees like our children's eyes can see—the life, school, streets—all of this our children show us through their photographs. Is there anyone in the world who understands what our children want to say?"

It is time for the world to understand what the Palestinian children are saying, to respond and to ensure that Palestinians have a right to return to their homelands.

10.28 am

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I, too, welcome the new Chamber. It is a grown-up place as, so far, the boys have demonstrated. I hope that it will continue to be so.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) on securing the debate. It coincides with the start of a momentous year for the middle east peace process, which, in the past 50 years, has raised hopes over and over again, only for those hopes to be dashed. It was estimated at the beginning of the process that there were 700,000 Palestinian refugees; the registered number now exceeds 3.6 million and there is a diaspora of 5 million Palestinians around the world. A huge number of people want a homeland in the same way as the Jews wanted, and were granted, a homeland in 1948. The creation of the state of Israel left a running sore of suffering and deprivation in the middle east which, of all people in the world, the Jews and the state of Israel must recognise.

Palestinian refugees have a right to return to their homeland. As early as 1917, the Balfour declaration stated:

"it being understood that nothing be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine".

Since then, countless resolutions and declarations from the League of Nations, the British Government and the United Nations have upheld the human right declared in 1949 that

"everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own and to return to his country"—

everyone, it seems, except the Palestinians, who are denied that right. Israel must be reminded of its legal and unfulfilled obligations. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) rightly pointed out, it is in Israel's interests to do so.

Many of us were lobbied last week by supporters of Palestine who were anxious to remind us of the conditions that have been endured by Palestinians for 30 years since the six-day war. They suffer socially and economically, as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West explained. Draconian Israeli security checks and the requirement for travel permits deny them access to employment, education and health care. We have heard about the terrible living conditions in which a quarter to a third of Palestinians receive no running water. It is interesting to note that 3 million people in Palestine consume a sixth of the total amount of water that is used by 6 million Israelis. That does not add up. The infrastructure has been sadly neglected by Israel.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency tries to provide basic health, education and social services to Palestinian refugees. The Department for International Development has just produced a pamphlet on the workings of UNRWA, which I have before me, and has pledged to improve the delivery and the amount of relief. However, despite the United Kingdom's £7 million pledge to UNRWA in 1998, the agency remains severely underfunded. What plans do the Government have to improve matters? The international community must increase its contributions and UNRWA must be made more efficient.

Economically, the dice is loaded against the Palestinians. For example, orange juice that is produced in the illegal settlements of Palestine is exported and labelled "Product of Israel", in violation of international agreements that aim to build up the Palestinian economy and encourage stability. Will the Minister ensure that that matter is raised at the World Trade Organisation negotiations in Seattle? In the eyes of the European Union, Israeli settlements in Palestine are illegal. Therefore, are not their products also illegal? Will the Minister remind Israel of the conditions that relate to the rules of origin for exports?

The refugees are the main subject of our debate, but we must remember the outstanding problems that face Mr. Barak and Mr. Arafat in the coming months. The problem of the settlements has been discussed many times in the House. After the six-day war, UN Security Council resolution 242 called for the exchange of land for peace, and the Oslo accord is based on that concept. Of the 144 illegal Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, 42 are to be dismantled, which is good news. All the time, however, more tenders are being approved by the Israeli Government within the existing settlements—more under Mr. Barak than even Mr. Netanyahu approved. If Palestine is to be granted secure territory, are our Government content to see it dotted all over the Israeli-held settlements?

What is the Minister's view on Jerusalem? Some 200,000 Palestinians live in east Jerusalem; how can they accept that Israel should have sovereignty over the city? Does he accept that a Palestine mini-state, if created, will never be able to accommodate the number of refugees who are likely to want to return? Will he support the 1967 borders for Palestine? If not, will he tell us how the Government and the EU propose to help the refugees remaining outside Palestine, generations of whom have been born and brought up in the camps? Are they condemned for ever to live in a world of poverty and deprivation, surrounded by the ever-increasing affluence of the Israelis? Their rights must not be ignored.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I think you still are—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Indeed.

Dr. Tonge: You have suddenly transmogrified Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Palestine was put under our protection after the first world war. After the second world war and the holocaust, the Jews were given their homeland. That was a just, brave and noble act by the international community, of which we all approved. However, the United Kingdom has a duty to give the Palestinians their human rights, too. We must welcome the momentum given to the middle east peace process by President Clinton and Messrs Barak and Arafat—and, indeed, the recent meeting between my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) and Mr. Arafat—but I urge the Government to play a more prominent role in the resolution of the refugee problem and not always to let the USA take the lead. I urge the Government, as the former mandatory power in Palestine, to put as much effort into this problem as they have put into the Northern Ireland peace process, and to give the Palestinian refugees their homeland.

10.37 am

Mr. John Austin (Erith and Thamesmead): Before I commence, I draw attention to an entry in the Register of Members' Interests relating to a visit to Jordan earlier this year.

I first visited Palestine before the Oslo accord in 1993, together with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden). I found there a general despair that there could ever be peace, an acceptable solution for the refugees, or any agreement on Jerusalem. We visited the refugee camps in Gaza and the west bank.

Before I went, my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) said that nothing could prepare me for that visit. He was absolutely right. I have seen refugee camps elsewhere in the world, but bad as they were, they always conveyed a sense of being temporary. Other refugee camps were poor and unhealthy; conditions were often squalid and there was malnutrition, suffering and misery, but they were essentially temporary. In Gaza, I was confronted with the fact that the camps had existed there for more than 40 years, as other hon. Members have said. They had an air of permanence, which led to the sense of despair and hopelessness.

Suddenly, after we returned, there was Oslo—a ray of light. Arafat shook hands with Rabin, prisoners were to be released, there would be safe passage between the west bank and Gaza, and land for peace as outlined in the UN resolution was to become a reality. Of course, the return of refugees and the issue of Jerusalem were put on the back burner for the final status negotiations, but they were there. What was not accounted for was the election of Netanyahu, who began to renegotiate Oslo, reneging on what had been agreed by continuing the illegal settlement programme, ethnically cleansing Jerusalem and creating new facts on the ground. The final status talks, which should have commenced in April 1996 and conclude in April 1999, have only just begun. Three and a half years' delay—three and a half years of more settlements and new facts on the ground—have made any solution that is satisfactory to the Palestinians more difficult to achieve.

The Palestinians' demands about refugees are simple and straightforward and are in accord with UN resolution 194, which involves the right either to return to the homes that they have lost or to receive compensation for that loss. The Israelis either regard refugees who are permanently settled outside Palestine as citizens where they are now refugees or hope that those refugees will be shipped out to countries that

[Mr. John Austin]

require an expanding labour force and encourage immigration. Even Iraq featured in speculation about a possible deal to bring Baghdad back into the international community. When the Minister replies, I hope that he will reassert the British Government's view of the right of Palestinians to return to their homeland.

Perhaps the Israelis hope that, if they drag out the final status talks, there will be fewer refugees alive who remember 1948 and that the refugees' children will not have the same emotional ties to Palestine. If so, as other hon. Members said, the Israelis are sadly mistaken. They fail to understand the basic nature of Palestinian society and of Palestinian communities, which was eloquently described by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey).

It is not only the refugees and their children who must keep alive the memory of what happened 50 years ago. We must never forget. In the final years of this millennium, the Palestinians constitute the largest refugee population in the world. The Zionist plan Daled, which was the master plan for the conquest of Palestine, began the expulsion of the population from Palestine before the creation of the Israeli state, when the territory was still under the British mandate. In the massacres that followed, of which Deir Yassin is the most famous, thousands of Palestinian men, women and children were murdered, mosques were destroyed, homes and villages were burned, property was looted and women were raped. Those were war crimes. We should never forget that waging a war on a civilian population, expelling the inhabitants and looting and destroying property are all war crimes. There may be doubts about whether it is now possible to pursue those war criminals, but there should be no doubt about the right of those who were driven from their homes to return or to receive compensation. It may be relatively easy to calculate the material losses, but how does one put a cost on the loss of a homeland and 50 years of suffering and subjugation?

The Palestinian sense of family, community and village is enormously strong, and has continued throughout 50 years of exile. The grandchild of a 1948 refugee will still identify with his or her grandparents' village and be a part of that village's family and community. It is the Palestinian's moral right to return and, as other hon. Members said, they also have a legal right to do so. UN resolution 194 recognises the fact that none of the agreements that dispossessed them involved their participation or consent. That resolution has been reaffirmed by the UN practically every year since it was passed.

We must not let the Israelis convince us that return is not feasible. The Israelis refer to abandoned villages, but those villages were not abandoned—their inhabitants were forced out. The villages remain in the memory of the refugees and are mentioned in thousands of well-documented title deeds, records and maps. Land that is now barren was once cultivated and could blossom again. Much of the Palestinian land remains empty and return would not result in the mass dislocation of Jewish immigrants, although some have alleged that it would. If, for example, the refugees in Lebanon were to return to their former home in Galilee, it would hardly affect the present Israelis—either Jews or Palestinians. The Palestinian refugees could return to their villages and fields, and peace would be restored to southern Lebanon and northern Israel.

I first visited Gaza in 1993, and I visited it again in 1996 with my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain). At that time, we saw some benefits from Oslo. There was still no free movement of people or goods, and the Israelis controlled checkpoints and borders in the occupied territories and externally, but there were signs of regeneration, including the beginning of building. My hon. Friend will remember that the hotel in which we stayed was half built, and many of the storeys above our rooms were unfinished.

I regret that we were unable to visit the camps during that visit because of the security situation following the Israeli assassination of Ayash, who was known as "The Engineer". I returned in 1998 and visited the camps to which hon. Members referred. The hotel in which the Minister and I had stayed had been finished, there were new homes and offices, and the airport had been built, but was not operating. When I visited the camps, nothing had changed since 1993. There was still degradation, water supplies were still toxic and children were still playing by open sewers. Refugees were packed in like sardines, as my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West said, at 4,000 per square kilometre. They peered over the barbed wire to see their land to the east empty with between three and six people per square kilometre. Let no one say that there is no room for the Palestinian refugees to return.

During the Minister's visit in 1996, the Palestinians outside the refugee camps were starved of water by the Israelis, denied access to markets, faced with prohibitive taxes and licence fees to move their goods, and prevented from moving them so that fruit and vegetables rotted on vehicles. He could see that, despite those adversities, the Palestinians of Gaza outside the refugee camps continued to produce high-quality agricultural products. If only they had equal access to water and freedom to transport their goods, the returning refugees could make the desert bloom again.

Four generations of Palestinian refugees have been looked after by UNRWA. Its job has become increasingly difficult because of donor fatigue and its 59 refugee camps are still marked by overcrowded, squalid conditions that can only breed anger and resentment.

In Gaza, life in the refugee camps has hardly improved since the Minister's visit in 1996. The deterioration in the Palestinian economy has struck particularly at refugees. The closures, which remain a massive burden on the Palestinian economy, are a major factor. Refugees were disproportionately dependent on work inside Israel, and unemployment has soared.

In June this year, I visited the Beka'a camp in Jordan. The conditions there are relatively better for its 75,000 refugees than in the refugee camps of Lebanon and Gaza, but they are still pitiful. The conditions clearly moved the Prime Minister when he visited the camp. Unemployment was high and UNRWA officials were concerned about future funding levels because key services have been cut. Many Palestinians believe that UNRWA is being phased out as a prelude to ending the refugee issue while the refugees remain in exile.

The Israeli position remains inflexible—no to return, no to Israel paying compensation, no to an historic apology. Israel expects the international community to

pay for the settlement of refugees in Arab countries and that compensation should be dealt with as a lump sum to Governments, not to individual refugees to compensate them for their suffering and losses. It is vital that, in the months and years ahead, we ensure that UNRWA is fully maintained until a final solution of resettlement is achieved and a fund for compensation established.

Israelis can never live in security and at peace with their neighbours or themselves while the dispossessed sit at their borders. A free and independent Palestine would be the best neighbour Israel could ever wish for. If real and lasting peace is to prevail in the middle east, the right of return must be guaranteed by the international community and must be implemented.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Berfore I call the next speaker, may I assist hon. Members who are present for this first sitting in Westminster Hall? The occupant of the Chair is to be addressed as Mr. or Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope that is clear and that it will become the custom.

10.48 am

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): The United Nations recommended partition of Palestine on 29 November 1947 and the state of Israel was declared on 14 May 1948 on 11 per cent. of occupied Palestine land. However before signing the armistice agreement in 1949, 78 per cent. of Palestine had been occupied by the Israelis. During 1948, almost 1 million Palestinians were forced to flee from 531 well-documented localities in what the Palestinians now described as their Al Nakba. That large exodus of Palestinians can be associated with various Israeli military occupations. The words "cleansing" and "broom" were used in at least four reports by Israeli officials about those operations at that time. Some nasty things happened to the Palestinians, and they have been covered by other speakers.

The estimated value of mobile and immobile property confiscated by the Israelis from the Palestinians at that time is £743 million at 1948 prices. The Palestinians claim that the Israeli seizure of their land and property is probably the biggest planned and organised plunder in history, and it resulted in United Nations resolution 194 of 11 December 1948, which has been referred to often during the debate. Ironically, 50 years later, when Jews have received compensation from their German oppressors and are about to have some of their stolen wealth returned from Swiss banks, successive Israeli Prime Ministers have failed to accept this resolution. That was made obvious again last weekend, during an interview with Mr. Barak by Sir David Frost on "Breakfast with Frost".

The Israel Land Administration, among other organisations, has kept careful records of what was hitherto Palestinian land. Moreover, pre-1948 aerial maps exist that compare well with today's satellite mapping techniques. Not only are there questions of compensation, but, if the land-for-peace deal is to be meaningful, the Palestinians who previously lived on that land should be allowed to return. Mr. Barak ruled that out again on "Breakfast with Frost" last weekend. Even a phased partial return of refugees seems out of the question at the moment.

While that view persists, can there ever be a lasting peace in the middle east? Let us hope that these are negotiating postures, rather than hard and fast views. It would be a nice gesture if the Israelis gave up one or more of their settlements on Palestinian land to allow at least some Palestinians to return to what was previously their land, perhaps in one of the less sensitive areas for Israeli security.

More than 50 years after the Palestinian exodus, their numbers in exile have grown to more than 4 million. The figures vary according to which source one takes them from—those are Palestinian figures. The refugees are, as has been pointed out, scattered round the Arab world, but they are principally located in the Gaza strip, the west bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

There are 59 official camps administered by UNRWA around the Arab world, but two thirds of Palestinian refugees live outside them. Many refugees living in the camps, especially children, suffer from illnesses related to poor and damp accommodation, and from problems associated with their environment generally. Conditions in the camps on the west bank, the Gaza strip and Lebanon are among the worst, with open drainage channels for waste water, open sewage outlets and garbage dumps putting everyone's health at serious risk. I have seen the conditions at Jabalia camp on the Gaza strip. Its population density is among the highest in the world. Houses are primitive and overcrowded, separated by alleyways so narrow that it is impossible to transport large goods, including coffins, which have to be carried over the fragile corrugated roofs of people's homes.

Eighty per cent. of the children have dental caries caused by poor diets, and the people of Jabalia have access to only one half of one hospital bed per thousand people. The World Health Organisation minimum requirement is two hospital beds per thousand people. The quality of life is also reflected in poor educational standards. Few classes contain fewer than 48 children, and schools regularly run a daily double shift system. UNRWA does its best in extremely difficult conditions. It receives its money from many nations, but is underfunded by an estimated £20 million and has recently had to shed many staff.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): It is nice to be the first person to intervene on this special day. The hon. Gentleman mentioned a figure of about 4 million refugees, yet he is talking about a limited return to the lands that were occupied. How is that practical? Is it possible for 4 million people to return? Is that an estimate of the number of people who would want to do so? Four million sounds like a large number in relation to that area of land.

Dr. Iddon: I shall answer that question during the remainder of my speech.

In mid-1996, so as to focus its efforts, UNRWA moved its headquarters from Vienna to the Gaza strip. The United States of America and, I am pleased to say, the European Union, are two of its largest funding bodies. Only 150,000 rural Jews live on the land of the

[Dr. Iddon]

expelled Palestinians. Indeed, 78 per cent. of Jews live in 15 per cent. of Israel, mainly in urban environments. Ironically, as has already been pointed out, the Gaza refugees are fewer in number than Russian immigrants to Israel. Indeed, a quarter of Jewish Israelis have chosen voluntarily to live in Israel.

The Palestinians claim that the Gaza refugees—1 million people crammed on to just 360 sq km of land—could return to almost unoccupied land, while most of the refugees in Lebanon could return to Arab territory in Galilee. It is obvious to any observer of the middle east peace process that there cannot be a permanent and stable peace until the question of the refugees has been resolved. They cannot be allowed for much longer to live in the conditions that currently prevail in the camps. The peace process appears to be making progress. Let us hope that that progress can be maintained until all the issues, including that of the Palestinian refugees, have been dealt with.

10.56 am

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I congratulate you, Mr.Winterton, on your promotion to Deputy Speaker. At least someone has gained something from this Milton Keynes of debating chambers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) on securing the first debate in this Room, but I regret that a subject of such enormous importance has been thus relegated. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) described the proceedings so far as "grown up". They are so grown up that the atmosphere is already dead.

I agree with the arguments that hon. Members have presented, although I regret that they tended to read them into the record. This subject should be debated in the main Chamber with a real sense of outrage about the scale of injustice that has been suffered by Palestinian refugees over the past 50 years. I shall not add to the cases that hon. Members brought up to demonstrate the scale of the continuing injustice of what is happening to Palestinian refugees because the record will show that they made their cases thoroughly.

Her Majesty's Government look ridiculous when they wrap their foreign policy in a so-called ethical dimension—such as their use of an ethical justification to go to war over Kosovo—given the scale of the injustice to 4 million refugees that has gone on for more than 50 years. Where, we are entitled to ask, is the ethical consistency in that policy? I hope that the Minister will say that the Government intend to continue to put increasing pressure on the Government of Israel to start to deal with the people of Palestine with the same sense of justice that they demanded for themselves in the wake of the appalling atrocity that happened to the people of the Jewish nation during the second world war. A holocaust of equal proportions has happened to the people of Palestine, who have been evicted from their homes and suffered disruption to their lives, and it has gone on for far too long.

Dr. Tonge: Were the hon. Gentleman's earlier remarks intended to suggest that this country should go to war with Israel?

Mr. Blunt: I was not suggesting that, but the hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the fact that the Government's policy is inconsistent. When we went to war over Kosovo, the reasons for doing so were dressed up in the supposedly ethical dimension of being the right and proper thing to do. I do not think that war was the right course of action for us to take over Kosovo. If the Government choose to present their foreign policy in terms of ethics and morality, they will rightly be asked why they have taken one course of action over one set of injustices, while failing to act over another.

I hope that the Government will stop trying to con us, in a sense, that we can deal in an ethically consistent way with an issue as difficult as this. The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Mr. Austin) rightly referred to the unequal negotiations that the Palestinian people face. I hope that the Government will use their influence to ensure that the negotiations are a little more equable by supporting the interests of Palestinian refugees.

11 am

Mr. Mohammad Sarwar (Glasgow, Govan): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) on securing this debate. The middle east peace process will shortly enter the crucial final status negotiations stage, in which the Palestinian refugee issue will be discussed for the first time. It is vital that that and the status of Jerusalem are addressed head on, rather than marginalised. Although it was not discussed during the interim stage of the process, it is essential to understand that the refugee issue is not insignificant but central to the middle east peace process.

The Palestinians are the largest single group of refugees in the world. More than 3.5 million are registered with UNRWA, the agency that is charged with their welfare. In most cases, two or three generations of Palestinians have been forced to live in the squalor and grinding poverty of refugee camps. That must not be allowed to continue. Displacement from their original homes and the abject poverty of those camps has done more to fuel the Palestinians' struggle against Israel than anything else. Unless the Palestinian refugees who are exiled in camps in the occupied territories, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan are allowed to return, we will not have a viable, final peace settlement. Any middle east peace process that does not take into consideration the interests of the vast majority of those refugees will not work.

Denial of the right of return is a continuing breach of articles 2 and 5 of the European convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination. The right of return for an estimated 3.5 million refugees is expressed in terms of their moral claim to return to homes from whch they have been displaced, and by reference to a number of United Nations resolutions. My hon. Friends have mentioned General Assembly resolution 194, which was passed in 1948 and states:

"refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date."

I accept that it will be neither politically nor practically possible to return all refugees to their original homes. There is general recognition among Palestinians that a right of return will mean a right to return to Palestinian national soil, rather than to their 1948 homes. It is necessary to distinguish between the principle of the right of return to Palestine as the national homeland, and exercising that right by returning to the same home or piece of land that refugees owned before 1948. The impossibility of implementing any right of return to the refugees' original homes within Israel proper must not preclude the return of Palestinian refugees to a future Palestinian state in the west bank and Gaza. It must not be used to deflect political attention away from the future of Palestinian refugees. The right of return must be vigorously pursued in the final status talks, and supported by the British Government and the international community. That will need to be backed up by compensation to the Palestinian refugees under General Assembly resolution 194 for lost property. Reparations should be given, especially to those who will not be able to return, in recognition of the historical injustice that created the refugee problem in the first place.

The Palestine National Authority and the Israeli Government will draw up a declaration of principle for the final status talks. It is essential that the declaration should make a specific commitment to the resolution of the refugees issue, as the original declaration of principle to the Oslo accord did. After the delays and stalemate of the Netanyahu Administration, the final status talks will provide an opportunity for resolution. However, the Israelis must not be allowed to disregard or overlook issues that they do not want to address, such as the Palestinian refugees. If the Israelis want a permanent peace, they must implement the United Nations resolution on the return of the Palestinian refugees. If the status of Jerusalem and the issue of the refugees are not decided, resentment and suspicion will build up among Palestinians, providing ammunition for those on both sides who want to wreck the agreement.

It is in the interests of Palestinians and Israelis not to waste the opportunity for lasting peace provided by the final status talks. The British Government and European Community have an important role to play—that of the honest broker. They must bring their influence to bear on the Israeli Government to ensure a just resolution of the refugees issue in the final status talks.

11.7 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): It is such a pleasure to refer to you as Mr. Deputy Speaker, Mr. Winterton. This is a historic debate, and I want to observe the usual courtesy of the House by congratulating the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) on securing a debate on a subject in which she has shown consistent interest since she was elected to Parliament. I must strike a note of dissent, however, as, like my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), I would like to commiserate with her. The future of the Palestinian refugees warranted a debate in the main Chamber of the House. I am still not sure why I am sitting in an annexe, albeit one that is 900 years old, while visitors are being shown around the Floor of the main Chamber. It feels like not the modernisation but the Disneyfication of Parliament, while the serious business of the House becomes a sideshow. I stress that that is a personal view, and I hope that my worst fears are not realised.

The issue that has been so admirably covered this morning is far from being a sideshow—

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): The hon. Lady is a Conservative Front-Bench spokesperson. Is she suggesting that modernisation should consist of Tuesday and Wednesday morning debates being taken on the Floor of the House, so that no one could visit—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I must point out that we are debating Palestinian refugees and that we have not re-opened the debate about whether or not there should be a parallel Chamber.

Mrs. Gillan: I must stress, for the benefit of the hon. Member for Hove (Mr. Caplin), that I was expressing a personal view. I hope that my worst fears will not be realised.

While I was preparing during the weekend for this debate, I decided to look at the photographs that I took when I visited the occupied territories and the Gaza strip in 1989. The delegation included Members of Parliament and members of the Bow group, who had been invited by the Palestinians so that the problems of the region could be explained to them. We toured the west bank and Gaza under United Nations protection, and we met families, teachers, doctors, local politicians, political activists and the then leading Palestinian advisers to Yasser Arafat. It was obvious that emotions ran exceedingly high. The language used often expressed profound hatred and bitterness, and at that time it was hard to envisage how a solution could ever be reached.

However, a member of the Palestinian host team—a woman—made a profound impression on the delegation. Hanan Ashwari painted a picture of hope and reason that transmitted to me an optimism that I still feel today. I hope that all Members who participate in this debate share that optimism about the Palestinians' future. Hanan Ashwari is a university professor, a Christian Arab and a friend to both Palestinians and Israelis. She has walked a difficult road. When we met her, she focused less on the political and more on the human element in the peace process. Although that dimension is all too easily obscured by hatred and conflict, it is necessary if the Israelis and the Palestinians are to find a solution. Such considerations have brought us to the brink of a solution in Northern Ireland.

I was reminded of the humanitarian element when I looked at my photographs of Hanan Ashwari detailing the problems of the Palestinians, of children chasing our bus and pretending to shoot guns at us and of a woman sitting in the ruins of her house, which had been bulldozed simply because her son was suspected of taking part in the intifada. I also remember the look of fear in an Israeli soldier's eye when he searched the belongings of Palestinian workers on a bus that was crossing into Israel. One of my most poignant memories

[Mrs. Gillan]

from that visit was of a girls' school in the Gaza strip, where a notice on the wall exhorted the dispossessed pupils, who had little hope, to be a lamp in a chamber if they could not be a star in the sky. Other hon. Members have already discussed the children. It is the children with whom we should be most concerned—future generations of Palestinians must not be blighted by their history.

In the decade or so since my visit in 1989, the peace process has moved forward. With a new Prime Minister in Israel, there is new urgency to that country's endeavours, but there are still many unresolved matters, primarily the refugees and their uncertain future. As other hon. Members have already said, the exact numbers of refugees and their location continue to be pressing issues. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency estimated that there are slightly more than 3.5 million refugees in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and the west bank. The Israeli Government claim that those figures were exaggerated. However, on closer examination, it becomes clear that they do not include countries where UNRWA does not operate, such as Egypt and Iraq. Moreover, they do not refer to Palestinians who were outside Palestine in 1947–48, or people who were expelled by Israel after 1967 or displaced by the June 1967 war. Although the numbers matter, they matter less than the principles of settlement which form a major plank of the permanent status negotiations.

The Palestinians have a justifiable desire to allow all refugees to return to their homes, but Israel rejects that principle on the ground that such a return would ensure conflict between Israel and the Palestinians for centuries to come. Although those positions appear irreconcilable, it is imperative that both sides continue to pursue a solution. After all, when the war ended, there was no mechanism for discussion, but some refugees were returned under the family reunification scheme. How much more could be achieved now that there are negotiations and a political will to find a lasting settlement. Peace in the middle east will not endure without resolving the problem of the Palestinian refugees.

The Conservative party will support the Government whenever they use their influence to urge everyone in the region to participate in negotiations and abide by international agreements. We are prepared to back them while they follow the aim, as set out by their predecessor, of achieving a lasting peace that is accepted by all and founded on the principle of respect for international law. Peace should mean security for Israel and prosperity, justice and self-determination for the Palestinians.

Britain's historic links give us a special interest in the peace process, and successive Governments have provided aid and support. Other hon. Members mentioned UNRWA. I hope that the Minister will reassure me on the continuation of aid and suport for the work of UNRWA. Although there is justifiable optimism that the refugee issue is now closer to resolution, the work of UNRWA needs to continue. It has successfully provided its services directly to refugees, including help with education, health care and social services. Indeed, it has supported Palestinian refugee families that are unable to meet their own basic needs and promoted self-reliance through community programmes. It is essential to the welfare of many.

Recent financial difficulties have resulted in austerity measures and a reduction in the support that is provided to refugees. What assessment has the Minister made of those difficulties and what actions can the Government take to alleviate the problems? Although there is international agreement that the work of UNRWA must continue until the Palestinian entity can take over its role, recent developments have caused uncertainty. The Minister should explain what has happened and shed some light on what actions are open to the Government.

A disturbing report in *The Times* today claims:

"At least eight leading figures, among them academics and heroes of the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation, were being held in detention and under house arrest".

Although that is a recent development, I hope that the Minister, who no doubt has his finger on the pulse of the middle east peace process, is able to enlighten us on the reasons for those arrests.

This is a short debate on an important international problem which both Opposition and Government Members want to see successfully resolved. Peace will bring humanitarian and financial dividends, and the peaceful option can provide greater prosperity and security for everyone in the region. We all share the sentiments that were expressed by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West. While I was researching this issue, I came across the Arabic proverb,

"One's parents cannot be replaced; so, too, is it impossible to replace one's homeland."

We will support the Government if they use our membership of all international institutions to encourage progress towards a lasting solution. If they work to that end, they will have the support of Her Majesty's loyal Opposition.

11.19 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) expressed delight that hon. Members were sitting where they pleased, but I hope that no one will read too much into the fact that Liberal Democrat Members are cosying up to the Government on the Front Bench. I noted that the hon. Members for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) and for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) displayed some signs of rigor mortis at the modernisation process on which Parliament has decided, but I am sure that they will soon come back to life.

I am advised that its semi-circular lay-out makes this the first non-confrontational Chamber that Westminster has experienced in 800 years of political sparring. I know that everyone will expect straight answers to questions, even if they are posed from a semi-circular position.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West for the opportunity to debate the issue of the Palestinian refugees. She, along with many of my hon. Friends and other hon. Members, spoke in moving detail about the refugees' plight, and her speech was based on and shaped by personal

knowledge, as were the speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden), for Erith and Thamesmead (Mr. Austin), for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) and for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar).

My hon. Friends have rightly reminded us that the refugee issue is one of the most important and difficult obstacles in the permanent status negotiations that are now under way between the Israelis and Palestinians to secure a lasting settlement in the middle east peace process. I am grateful for the fact that hon. Members displayed a unanimity rarely seen in the House. There was a consensus between the Opposition and Government Front-Bench spokesmen—as shown by the speeches of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge)—that the issue of the Palestinians must be addressed as part of the peace process.

As we have heard, the problem is enormous. There are 3.5 million Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the west bank and Gaza strip. Others are dispersed throughout the world. Some lost their homes in 1948 and have been in refugee camps ever since, some lost their homes in 1967 and others were born in the refugee camps. They are victims of an appalling historic injustice. No lasting peace settlement is possible without addressing their plight, however difficult that will be politically, logistically and financially.

As we have been told, the condition of the refugees has been a matter of international concern for more than 50 years, during which Britain and the United Nations have provided practical support. Most of our support is channelled through UNWRA, which provides accommodation for more than 1 million refugees and practical support for many others. It provides education, health care and relief aid that is a lifeline for many in the camps.

In addition to accommodation, UNWRA provides education to 460,000 schoolchildren, primary health care to more than 1 million refugees and emergency relief for 200,000 of the poorest refugees. The member states of the European Union together form the largest donor to UNWRA, Britain being one of the largest individual donors. The hon. Member for Richmond Park asked us to do more, and we are. In 1997, our bilateral contribution, excluding contributions through the European Union, was £6 million. This year we are contributing £9 million in bilateral aid, which is £3 million more than the previous Government's total.

In his visit to the region at the end of October, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary gave expression to our support and concern for the Palestinian refugees when he visited Deir al-Balah refugee camp. I know that he was shocked at the conditions there, which hon. Members described. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield gave a graphic account of the conditions that he had seen, and I acknowledge his long involvement in and commitment to the issue, which dates back to the 1970s.

It is intolerable that no end is in sight to the refugees' plight. We must all contribute to such a resolution as part of the middle east peace process. We are committed to doing all that we can to achieve a successful outcome to that process. We are in regular touch with all the parties, providing support for them in their efforts to find a just, lasting and comprehensive peace. President Arafat was in London for meetings on 9 November; I was present at some of those meetings. Israeli Prime Minister Barak and Egyptian Foreign Minister Moussa were here last week. We are also in regular contact with the Syrians and the Lebanese. Negotiations between the parties occur against a background of international standards. The international standard for refugees is United Nations General Assembly resolution 194, which dates from 1948, and for which Britain voted. That resolution states that

"refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so... and compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return".

Resolution 194 has been the basis of the United Kingdom's position since 1948. We have repeatedly made that clear, and I am happy to do so again, especially in response to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead, whose personal commitment, as I saw at first hand when, as he described, I visited the middle east in January 1996, is widely recognised and admired.

A peace deal, including agreements on how to implement resolution 194, would give Palestinian refugees a real opportunity for a stable and prosperous future. Today, partly because of the visionary leadership shown by Prime Minister Barak and the Israeli Government, the prospects for such a deal look better than they have for a long time—perhaps better than ever. There is an historic window that all the parties at the negotiations must keep open, through which they must all climb together.

The interests of the refugees and their right to live with justice and in freedom must not be forgotten. It is for the Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate a way forward—nobody outside that process should pre-empt their decisions. However, the immediate parties to the peace process negotiations cannot alone find the huge resources needed for them to begin to solve the refugee problem.

Mr. Blunt: Does the Minister think that Mr. Barak has shown visionary leadership on the issue of settlements?

Mr. Hain: We do not agree with the settlement process long adopted by Israel. Although Prime Minister Barak has taken important steps forward on the settlement issue, he has a long way to go.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West asked a specific question. Those involved should know that Britain acknowledges that the European Union and the United States especially have a responsibility to contribute to a solution of the refugee issue, as does Israel. Indeed, it is more than a responsiblity—a moral and political duty is on us all. Countries elsewhere in the middle east, including the Gulf states, can also play an important role. The Palestinian refugees are some of the most serious casualties of a post-second world war history largely shaped by—and, in many respects, won by—the west. It is time for the world to redeem the debt owed to the

[Mr. Hain]

Palestinians and, by so doing, to create a lasting peace by which the security of all in the middle east, especially Israel's, is guaranteed.

I shall respond to the final point made by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham about reports this morning that Palestinians are being placed under house arrest, and to the dinosaur-like point of the hon. Member for Reigate. Human rights are indivisible across the globe. The Palestinians must respect the human rights of those living within Palestine, just as the Israelis should recognise the human rights of refugees and others living within Israel and the territories that it currently controls. The matter of refugees is ultimately one of human rights. The Government are determined to help to address that matter, however difficult—in terms of logistics, finance, resources and, of course politics—that task will be.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The first debate is now at an end. Although there may be slight difficulties because of changes of Ministers and of civil servants, we move to the second debate, which has been initiated by the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), on the subject of road access to RAF Fairford.

RAF Fairford (Road Access)

11.29 am

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am grateful to you, Mr. Chairman, and to Madam Speaker for affording me the opportunity to initiate the second of the Adjournment debates in this alternative Chamber. I am also grateful to the Under-Secretary for being present and agreeing to reply. I am glad to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), whose constituency adjoins mine and who therefore has part responsibility for this problem.

Mr. Chairman, one of the main reasons—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. "Mr. Deputy Speaker" is the order of address to the Chair in this parallel Chamber in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker—no discourtesy was meant. The newness of this procedure is the reason for that slip of the tongue.

One of the main reasons for requesting the debate is to establish which Department will take a lead role in this matter; that, at least, is now clarified. In order to set the problem in context, I should point out that RAF Fairford is one of the main strategic NATO bases in this country. It has one of the longest runways, which straddles the Wiltshire-Gloucestershire border, and is one of the few bases in this country where the massive American C117 Galaxy transport planes can land.

I am sure that you will be interested to know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that RAF Fairford was used during the invasion of Libya and in the Gulf and Kosovo conflicts as the launch base for American B52 bombers. Furthermore, it has also become the home of the three-day international air tattoo. The result of all that activity is that the main runway needs to be completely refurbished at a cost of more than £60 million. Most important, it is estimated that that will involve some 60,000 heavy goods vehicle movements. It is that aspect which causes my constituents concern.

I should say straight away that my constituents welcome the base and all the associated business that it brings. I understand, therefore, that Cotswold district council, which will take the lead in this matter, is not likely to object to the planning application for the project. Nevertheless, it is also concerned about the 60,000 heavy goods vehicle movements, which will come from either the A417 at Fairford or the A419 from Latton via the C124. The latter is a minor public road which is in places single track. There are two single-track bridges on it which form an S-bend. Until recently, they had no traffic control at all, but I am glad to say that they now at least have some traffic lights.

It has been agreed that approximately £1 million will be generated by the lorry movements levy as a result of the 60,000 movements. However, that is sufficient to carry out only comparatively minor road works such as strengthening traffic lights signing. That is inadequate. Clearly, my constituents' lives are going to be put at risk by huge, heavily loaded juggernauts going up and down single-track roads with deep drainage ditches on either side. Imagine what will happen when a cyclist meets one of those lorries on a dark and icy winter's night, and indeed, when the lorry tries to pull up in time to avoid the cyclist.

In addition to that huge civil engineering product, tens of thousands of car and lorry movements are generated over the three days of the international air tattoo, which will become an annual event once the runways are refurbished.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that, although most of the traffic problems that he described will affect his constituency, during the air tattoo and also because of the refurbishing of the airstrip there will be a significant increase in traffic through Ashton Keynes and other villages in my constituency?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The problem is complicated because it involves several Westminster constituencies and several local authorities. Indeed, the mere fact that the base is bisected by the Gloucestershire-Wiltshire border makes it doubly complicated.

It cannot make any sense for a major NATO base to be served by such a minor, public, single-track road. One can imagine all sorts of reasons for vehicles having to move rapidly in and out of the base—for example, with casualties, ordnance, fuel and other stores required by such a large base. They could be transported in and out by air, but that may not always be possible due to weather and other circumstances. It may not be cost-effective to move heavy goods in and out of the base by air. The most cost-effective way is by road.

It is not my function today to provide specific, costed proposals to solve the problem. That is for experts from the Gloucestershire and Wiltshire highways authorities and other planning authorities such as Cotswold district council, North Wiltshire district council and Thamesdown borough council—now the unitary authority of Swindon—which also have responsibility in the matter. Those authorities are all working with the Highways Agency and the Government office for the south west to provide a satisfactory solution for a safe access road to the base.

The Minister may say that it is for the highways authorities of the two county councils to put in a bid for the road scheme to be considered, but that would be an inadequate reply. The situation is unique. Due to its huge refurbishment, the base has a new lease of life and, judging from the number of confidential letters that I receive from the Ministry of Defence about one huge NATO exercise after another, it is clear that it will be used more and more. Its servicing and the enormous increase in local traffic compared with when the base was originally used, and even in recent years, mean that current road access is totally inadequate.

My constituents believe that, as the Americans are paying a large proportion of the cost of the refurbishment through their NATO contributions, they should make the major contribution to the local road system, which they use. I emphasise again that my constituents are pleased to see the Americans and welcome them. Many friendships have been made between Americans and local people and my constituents enjoy the benefits of the spin-off from the base, but they fear the danger posed by the road.

If the Government are not prepared to approach NATO or the Americans, a Government Department must provide the funds. I am delighted to see the Under-Secretary here today because my constituents believe that the MOD should provide the funds in this unique situation. If the MOD cannot, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions must. Either it must fund a Highways Agency project to build a proper access road or, as the final alternative, it must fund a joint county council bid for the county highways authority to build the road. That is the least attractive method of funding the road, because it would have to compete with all the other badly needed road schemes in both counties and that would be unacceptable.

I am grateful to the Minister for coming to listen to the problem this morning. I have no idea what his response will be, but I hope that it will be sympathetic because the current position is unsatisfactory not only for the base but, above all, for the quality of life of my constituents and those in the adjoining constituencies of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire and the hon. Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills), who join me today in pressing the Government to find a solution.

I hope that it will not take a fatality or other serious accident to persuade the Government to sit up and take notice of the problem. There is a straightforward and constructive way forward. It is a relatively simple road to build and will not require a huge amount of money. It needs to be a fairly straight, two-way road. It does not need to be an A or B road. An example has already been set in the western part of the water park by the western spine road—a straightforward road which was built from gravel money. If we could have a similar road in the eastern part, the problem would be solved. I look forward to the Minister's response.

11.39 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): It is not the first time that I have laboured under your adjudication, Mr. Deputy Speaker, although it is the first time in this Room, and it is a novel experience.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) on securing this Adjournment debate in this new setting. Clearly, road access to RAF Fairford has generated considerable public interest and is a matter of great importance to his constituents. He is evidently concerned about the project on two counts. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) has expressed similar concerns. The first count is the construction activity over the next two years—the project is scheduled to finish in about November 2001—and the second is the impact on the C124 road.

It may be helpful if I briefly put the project into its historical context. After the second world war, the United States corps of engineers extended RAF Fairford to its present size between 1949 and 1956. It was designed for the aircraft of the time, notably types B47 and KC97—the type of aircraft that you and I, Mr. Deputy Speaker, assembled in the form of Airfix models when we were boys. Since that time, no major surfacing work has been carried out, apart from a contract in 1977 to overlay the main runway and taxiways with asphalt. Over most of the airfield, the concrete and asphalt surfacing is very old and has deteriorated to the point at

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which major reconstruction is needed to maintain the integrity of the runway and provide a safe operating base for visiting aircraft.

It is, therefore, necessary to undertake a major reconstruction project to bring the airfield infrastructure back to a safe and satisfactory standard. At the same time, the runway and pavements will be redesigned to cater for the size and weight of modern military aircraft. The overall estimated cost of the project is slightly more than £60 million, to which the hon. Member for Cotswold referred. It is about £65 million, and construction is programmed over 21 months from spring 2000. The contract will also encourage the contractor to re-use excavated material and local resources whenever possible, to minimise the transporting of material to and from the site.

Nevertheless, it is recognised that the construction work will generate a considerable amount of lorry traffic in and out of RAF Fairford. The current estimate is that 120,000 lorry movements could be required. Therefore, a decision was made in June 1998 to have early consultations with the planning and highway authorities. Extensive consultation and discussion was undertaken with the highway authorities of the two county councils concerned, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, and with representatives of the local councils, the results of which determined that access to the base for construction traffic will be from the A419 via a minor road, the C124.

The highway authorities have stipulated that the installation of traffic lights, road strengthening and a degree of repair work should be undertaken to ensure the continued safety of the road, as part of the enabling works before any base construction work begins. All this additional work is to be carried out by my Department at a cost of about £640,000.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am sorry to interrupt the Minister in what is proving to be an extremely constructive and useful reply. My constituents are worried about whether one-way traffic from the A419 at Latton—rather than access to the base from the A417 at Fairford—will be rigorously enforced by the MOD, or whatever body is to be in charge of this huge contract. In that case, at least there would be traffic into the base from only one way, rather than two ways.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, but I am not in a position to speak for the agencies that are charged with the enforcement of traffic law and regulation. Those are matters beyond my competence, and certainly beyond my wit.

I emphasise that the work on this construction project is absolutely necessary to ensure that the essential facilities at Fairford, which have deteriorated over the past 20 years or so, are brought up to the standard that is needed to guarantee its continued use as an essential operating base in times of crisis. That role was aptly demonstrated and reinforced during our recent operations in Iraq and Kosovo. I point out to the hon. Member for Cotswold, in the kindest possible way, that it was not an invasion of Libya but a bombing expedition that was mounted from Fairford, which is not quite the same thing. I should point out to him that Fairford is not an operational base except in times of crisis. The base's normal staffing comprises about 400 souls. A comparison with RAF Lyneham, which has about 5,000 people, puts Fairford's level of use into perspective. However, it remains an essential staging post.

The hon. Member for Cotswold mentioned the number of letters that he receives from the MOD about exercises constantly taking place. I take that as a backhanded compliment, in that we keep local Members well informed about our intentions. In reality, however, NATO exercises involving Fairford take place only once a year. It is not regularly used in the way in which they, perhaps inadvertently, suggested.

Mr. Gray: The Minister is right to say that RAF Lyneham, which is in my constitutency, has 5,000 service personnel—plus a further 5,000 spouses, which takes the total number of people to 10,000. However, Lyneham, the town that is associated with the base, is well served by major roads. The problem with Fairford is that, by contrast, a tiny single-track road with a small bridge will take the hundreds of thousands of lorries that the Minister described. Is £640,000 rather a modest sum for the repair of a road that will be under such immense pressure?

Mr. Kilfoyle: That sum has been computed as being appropriate to the demands that will be made of the road. I remind the hon. Gentleman that extensive consultation with both of the relevant district and county councils has taken place. It was in that spirit of partnership that the proposal was agreed.

I am aware that for many years, the district and parish councils have been trying to get the C124 upgraded. I do not dispute the fact that that is a long-standing local bone of contention that existed before we made our proposals on undertaking these works. However, although the road has been designated as the eastern spine road for the future of gravel extraction in the area and the development of the Cotswold water park, I understand that the highway authorities have given it no priority for upgrading. The locus for comments on upgrading belongs with those authorities rather than the MOD. We are talking about a completely ad hoc use of the road for specific periods and the amount of money that has been agreed will allow for the remediation of that road. The upgrading will include not only the installation of traffic lights but kerbing, channelling and other necessary improvements.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am not sure that the Minister is entirely correct. I know that high-level meetings have taken place between his Department, the Government office for the south west and the Highways Agency to try to solve the problem. Would he and his senior officials be prepared to meet a delegation from the relevant councils, perhaps attended by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire and me?

Mr. Kilfoyle: We could have pre-empted this debate if such a meeting—which has, I believe, been arranged—had already taken place. I am always glad to meet relevant local authorities where the matter is of local interest. However, local councils and some residents, at

least, will perhaps have regarded news of the proposed refurbishment of the Fairford base as a blessing in disguise. Although the subject of today's debate is the disruption and inconvenience caused by the construction traffic, which is recognised by all parties, there is an opportunity to upgrade the C124, and largely at someone else's expense.

I should make it absolutely plain that this is not a decision for the Ministry of Defence. The role of RAF Fairford is unchanged and the project will not generate an increase in traffic in the long term. As such, the MOD sees no requirement permanently to upgrade the road, and will take only such measures as are required by the highways authorities of Wiltshire and Gloucestershire county councils. Therefore, works are limited to those measures that are designed to meet the temporary increase in construction traffic.

I should also disabuse the hon. Member for Cotswold of the notion that we have in some way established that we are the lead Department for road upgrading in the area; we are not. That remains wholly within the remit of the highways agencies. Our concern is ensuring that, during the Fairford refurbishment programme, all appropriate steps are taken to ensure the road's integrity and safety, and its refurbishment to the required standard.

I welcome the opportunity to make it clear that, as a responsible Department, the MOD has acted within the letter and spirit of the relevant planning laws, and has also taken fully into account the various local issues that have arisen. I can assure the hon. Members for North Wiltshire and for Cotswold that it will continue to do so. I should also place on record the MOD's gratitude for the constructive co-operation shown by local council authorities in helping to resolve planning issues at RAF Fairford and permitting a major NATO project to proceed on schedule. However, the MOD is not a regeneration agency and cannot carry out public road improvements.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Minister has been very generous in giving way. He seems to be saying that the MOD wants to have its cake and eat it. It wants to upgrade the base, but that will disrupt local people who, at the moment, are showing considerable good will. If the MOD is not prepared to fulfil its responsibilities by ensuring my constituents' safety, some of that good will might rapidly ebb away.

Mr. Kilfoyle: It is difficult to substantiate that charge; indeed, I would argue the reverse. In fact, the MOD has shown a willingness to consult and negotiate with all those involved—county and district councils—that is above and beyond the call of duty. We have not merely met but exceeded our obligations to upgrade the road. The hon. Member for Cotswold shakes his head, but he cannot expect me to accept on the MOD's behalf the responsibilities of other Government agencies in this regard. As I have said, we are doing all that we can to restore the true integrity of the Fairford base and to cater as far as is possible for the difficulties that will arise in respect of the C124.

Mr. Gray: We have a little time in hand, so perhaps the Minister will not mind giving way for a second time. The point that he makes—that maintenance of RAF Fairford is a matter for the MOD, but maintenance of the road is a matter for the local highway authority—is probably a good one, and may well be correct in terms of the machinery of government. However, does he accept that the standard spending assessment and the revenue support grant settlements for Wiltshire have been reduced substantially in recent years, and are ill-equipped to provide the extra money for upgrading the road to which he refers? Will he write to the Deputy Prime Minister to encourage him to increase the revenue support grant for Wiltshire to take account of the extra cost that we have discussed?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am tempted to write to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister about many matters, but the SSA for Wiltshire is not among them—although I might be tempted to write to him about the SSA for my local authority.

I told the hon. Member for Cotswold that we had gone beyond the call of duty. One of our more innovative steps involved the levy that he mentioned. Placing a £5 levy on every movement will inhibit the excessive use by vehicles of that road. When the contract goes out to tender, it will be difficult for anyone to meet the tender criteria and submit a successful bid unless they maximise the use of vehicles and minimise the number of lorry runs along the road. We are trying to be as innovative as possible and minimise disruption on the road.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To be honest, the levy is peanuts. It would fund slapping a bit of tarmac in some potholes, but that would come out when the first heavy goods vehicle went over it. More money is needed to build a proper road that provides access to and from the base.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I can only ask the hon. Gentleman to re-examine our proposal, which involves widening stretches of the road, kerbing and channelling, installing traffic lights and upgrading the road. Yes, potholes will be filled in, but every constituency in the land has potholes that need to be filled in. We are trying to do the best that we can to minimise disruption.

Before I gave way for the umpteenth time, I was saying—I do not mean this to be harsh—that self-evidently the MOD is not a regeneration agency. We cannot carry out public road improvements other than those that arise as a consequence of our obligations to meet operational objectives within the established planning processes. I am sure that no hon. Member who has spoken would argue that we have not made sure that the district and county authorities were fully cognisant of all of our intentions and moves. Moreover, we have taken those authorities on board with us.

With the exception of the construction, access and traffic management that is associated with the Fairford project, the status of the C124 is properly the responsibility of other Departments and of the Highways Agency. I am not trying to divorce my Department from its responsibilities—quite the reverse. We have taken on board responsibilities that technically and legally we could have argued were not ours. However, we did not argue that because of the spirit of

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partnership with local councils and out of consideration for the people who will be disrupted by the necessary work at RAF Fairford.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I had thought that I was going to have to suspend this first sitting in Westminster Hall, but the Minister and the initiator of the next debate are now both present, and we can move on to it.

Children and Tobacco Products

11.58 am

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): I am pleased to be one of the first Members to initiate a debate in this Chamber. I must admit to having some reservations about the idea, but I trust that it will give Back Benchers an ample opportunity to raise issues of concern to them and their constitutents and to get a thorough reply from the Government. I hope that I shall succeed in that today.

I want to set in context the reasons for my concern about the increased use by children of tobacco products, and about their increased availability. We all know about the undeniable link between smoking and cancer, but far fewer people are aware of the link between chewing tobacco products and the incidence of oral cancer. I recently met surgeons who specialise in the maxillo-facial work that is associated with the damage that cancer does to the mouth and face. Frankly, I was appalled and sickened by the devastation that cancer can cause to the mouth and face. The surgeons showed me slides of their many patients who suffer from this debilitating illness. Perhaps the most worrying aspect of that meeting was my introduction to a new product that is being cynically marketed to children, especially within the ethnic minority community.

The Minister will be aware that it is an accepted culture within some sections of the Asian community, mainly among Indians and Bangladeshis, to chew tobacco or paan. Such products often take the form of betel nut leaf parcels, containing tobacco, betel nut, lime and other ingredients, and are considered beneficial to digestion and overall health. Bidis, which are unfiltered cigarettes, are also on the market. In addition to the paan products—the leaf-based parcels—a new generation of tobacco products has begun to enter the market. Gutkha is a sweetened tobacco which is packaged in brightly coloured foil parcels—sometimes with children's faces on them—and is marketed in newsagents throughout ethnically diverse communities for as little as 20p.

Although chewing paan is a traditional habit brought from south Asia, it was hoped that the habit would fade rather than passed on to the next generation. That fear has provoked the Indian tobacco manufacturers to seek new ways of gaining a market. Their cynical marketing tactics are designed to attract a new generation, who may be more likely to chew products flavoured with chocolate or sweeteners, as the leaf parcels are a more acquired taste.

Gutkha is not illegal. Hon. Members may remember the introduction, in 1989, of Skoal Bandits, which were pouches of tobacco that resembled tea bags and were designed to be sucked. They brought concern and action from the Government of the day. The then Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), said in a written answer that he was acting to prevent children and young people from taking up such a dangerous habit. He stated that there was evidence that the habit could result in mouth cancer, which is particularly difficult to treat. As a result, the Tobacco for Oral Use (Safety) Regulations 1992 were introduced. They banned the supply of

"any oral product made wholly or partly of tobacco which is intended for oral use unless it is intended to be smoked or chewed".

I am pleased that that legislation was passed. Unfortunately, by specifically excluding other products that are chewed or smoked, it left no room to apply the regulations to gutkha or any similar product that is chewed rather than sucked. I hope that the Minister will agree that it is strange to distinguish between products that are put into the mouth on the basis of whether they are chewed or sucked.

Although such products are still legal, it is an offence to supply them to minors under the Children and Young Persons (Protection from Tobacco) Act 1991. Just as it is illegal to sell cigarettes to under-16s, it is illegal to supply gutkha. According to reports and media investigations, however, young children from across the cultures are now buying these products. They are a cheap, easy and tastier alternative to cigarettes, but they are equally harmful, if not more so. Research from India gives an insight into the problems that such products can cause to children's health. Children as young as 12 have already been diagnosed with pre-cancerous mouth lesions due to gutkha use. Every year, thousands of British children visit the Indian sub-continent and pick up the habit, which they can continue when they return home because access to gutkha remains so easy. Many of the packages have no description of their contents, although other harmful substances, such as lead and silver, have been found to be present.

The incidence of oral cancer is especially high in India, and has been linked to the use of chewing tobacco. India is the third largest manufacturer of tobacco, behind China and the USA, and produces almost 8 per cent. of the world's tobacco, 75 per cent. of which is used for internal consumption. Pakistan is the 10th leading producer, and Bangladesh is the 17th. Furthermore, children are involved in the production of such tobacco products in harsh labour conditions in India and other parts of south Asia.

We also know that chewing tobacco products is a popular habit in the United Kingdom. A survey of Bangladeshi women in West Yorkshire found that 95 per cent. chewed paan. A study by the university of Birmingham school of dentistry reported that 92 per cent. of males and 96 per cent. of females interviewed chewed paan on a daily basis, and that 39 per cent. and 82 per cent. respectively included tobacco within their paan.

We need only look at the incidence of oral cancer to realise the health implications of using tobacco products, whether they be chewed, sucked or smoked. Oral cancer in the UK accounts for 1.6 per cent. of cancer cases and 1.2 per cent. of all deaths. More than 2,000 cases are diagnosed in England and Wales each year and more than 60 per cent. of patients die as a result of oral lesions. The figures are higher than those for cancer of the cervix or skin cancer, yet, because both those cancers feature more prominently in the debate on cancer, people are more aware of them than they are of the causes of oral cancer. In addition to the huge personal and social costs of oral cancer, the cost to the national health service is estimated to be £50,000 a case. If we are to avoid a massive national bill and thousands more deaths each year, the Government must get a grip of the issue.

It would be strange to have a debate on the subject of children and tobacco products and not deal with the problems of under-age smoking, which is more common than tobacco-chewing among the young. The effects of smoking on health are well versed. They account for more than 120,000 deaths each year and cause a range of respiratory and heart problems. However, despite the obvious health risks, a significant number of under-16s smoke, and 450 children are believed to start smoking every day. Surveys in 1997 classed 11 per cent. of 11 to 15-year-olds as regular smokers. They also found that more girls smoked than boys. Various reasons were given for that, including the perception of smoking as a cool activity and the desire to copy celebrities and pop stars. In addition, many young girls believe that smoking will help them to control their weight. But the factor that most influences a child's decision to smoke is whether either, or both, of his or her parents, or an older sibling, smokes. Children with two smoking parents are three times more likely to be regular smokers than children who live in households where neither parent smokes. A child whose older sibling smokes is five times more likely to be a regular smoker than a child who does not have an older sibling who smokes.

There is no doubt that the younger a person starts to smoke, the more difficult it is to quit and the more detrimental smoking is on health. Some 82 per cent. of adult smokers start smoking as teenagers. Smokers who start smoking at the age of 15 are three times more likely to die from lung cancer than those who start in their mid-20s. Despite legislation that bans the under-16s from purchasing cigarettes, surveys show that smoking remains an activity for a significant number of children in this country. But few of us need statistics to confirm what we know from observations. How many times have we seen children walking around our towns smoking? Children who hardly look old enough to be out on their own are indulging in an activity that threatens their health.

I am concerned about how children get hold of cigarettes and chewing tobacco. In 1992, the previous Government set a target to reduce smoking among 11 to 15-year-olds from 8 per cent. in 1988 to less than 6 per cent. in 1994. Last year, the Government set a new target to reduce smoking among children from 13 per cent. in 1996 to 9 per cent. or less in 2010. Those figures are still too high. The Government must take a much tougher line on the supply of tobacco products to children.

Far too many newsagents, garage forecourt shops and other retailers are willing to sell cigarettes to children without checking how old those children are. Of course, children often look much older than they are these days—we all know that, and even I find it difficult to distinguish between a 13-year-old girl and a 16-year-old girl. Make-up, clothes and sheer confidence allow children to masquerade as adults. People might suggest that it is also difficult to know how to spot an MP these days. Whatever they wear and however they look, under-16s should not have access to tobacco products. Retailers should be required to ask for identification for all sales to young people who look as though they might be under 16.

Trading standards officers have an important duty to perform—they must be more proactive in seeking out retailers who continue to flout the law and put our children's health at risk. Not only must there be more spot-checks on retailers, but the penalties on those found supplying to under-16s must be stricter. Trading standards officers should be more involved. I was

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concerned to learn from a written answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry a couple of weeks ago that levels of funding given to trading standards officers varied. That must have an impact on the work that they are able to do within their community.

It is not good enough for retailers to claim that they believe a young person to be 16—they must demand identification and refuse to sell cigarettes and other tobacco products on a failure to produce identification. I trust that the Government will review seriously the penalties in place—only the most severe sanctions will bring to the attention of retailers the seriousness of the issue.

We know that not all under-16s who smoke buy their cigarettes personally—many get friends, relatives or even strangers to purchase them. That activity, too, must be a target for the Government. Better education on the health risks and on the law regarding under-age smoking is essential if we are to convince people that they must do everything in their power to prevent children from smoking, and if we are to deny the tobacco manufacturers a new generation of smokers.

When I recently visited a school as part of the UNICEF "Put it to your MP day", I was concerned to hear from one of my constituents that children under 16 believe that it is easy to obtain cigarettes. They have merely to stand outside a newsagent and ask an adult or an older friend who is going in to buy cigarettes for them. It must surely be for us to raise awareness of such issues among the public to ensure that we all take responsibility for not assisting in supplying cigarettes to young people.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will the hon. Lady also urge the Government, as some of us have for many years, to be more stringent on advertising and to make the warning on the back of cigarette packs similar to that used in Australia, which takes up half of the pack and warns of the dangers of cigarette smoking? Too many of our young people are still being encouraged to smoke. As chairman of the National Asthma Campaign, I am most concerned that you should not allow people to be influenced by advertising. Many youngsters follow motor racing and see tobacco advertising. We should be cutting down on all such advertising, and not excluding anybody.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. Before the hon. Lady replies to that intervention, I should point out that it is appropriate for all speakers to address the Chair, even though that might be difficult given the lay-out of sittings in Westminster Hall.

Ms Ward: The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) made important and correct points. I agree that we must look carefully at the issue of advertising and that we should prevent children from seeing advertising as they go into shops. The Government have carefully considered the issues of advertising and tobacco sponsorship and I have no doubt that pressure will remain on them on that issue. The Government must generate a high-profile campaign aimed at educating children and young people about the damage to their health that is caused by smoking. By engaging the support of non-smoking pop stars, celebrities and sporting heroes, they may be able to generate a new message that it is uncool to smoke and that it is certainly not an activity that deserves any respect in the playground or classroom.

So far, I have talked about the children who actively engage in smoking or chewing tobacco products, whether or not they are aware of the damage to their health. The debate, however, encompasses another section of that generation—those who suffer from tobacco products through second-hand smoke. All too often, we see children, and sometimes even babies, being smoked over by their parents and relatives. In the home and in public, children—through no choice of their own—are forced to endure others' smoke. Not only can that encourage them to take up the habit, but passive smoking can increase the chances of asthma and lung cancer in children.

Children are subjected to passive smoking in restaurants and other public places, yet there are no laws in place to prevent that. Perhaps if the Government introduced a measure banning children from sitting in any designated smoking area, we would, in some small but significant way, be able to protect them. Parents would not be able to take their children into smoking carriages on trains or sit them in smoking areas of restaurants or other public places. Such a measure would mean that the Government had to require all public facilities, including restaurants and bars, to have designated no-smoking areas, but I, for one, would welcome that.

The Government have a responsibility to prevent children from having access to tobacco products. They must do all that they can to educate children and their parents about the dangers of smoking or chewing tobacco. No one expects that to be an easy task and everyone recognises the influence of the tobacco industry worldwide. Nevertheless, the future health of our nation depends on a robust and determined effort by the Government to prevent under-age access and reduce the number of adult smokers and chewers in years to come.

12.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Ms Ward) on securing the debate and providing me with my first opportunity to speak in this newly formed Chamber. Although I agree with you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that speaking through the Chair may not come as naturally to hon. Members because of the Room's configuration, it is a great pleasure, when replying to an Adjournment debate initiated by a Labour Member, to be able to look at her, rather than having to address an empty space and trying to look backwards. Both Chamber shapes have their advantages; no doubt in due course we will make up our minds about which we prefer.

Children's access to tobacco is an important subject and I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Watford secured time to discuss it. If we do not address the problem when they are young, we as a nation will count the cost in disease and in lives. We do not know enough about the precise health risk posed by oral tobacco, particularly among some of our ethnic

minority communities, but this much we do know: oral tobacco is a potentially lethal product. I shall focus on the Government's commitment to addressing the particular problems associated with it. I stress that we are concerned about getting the message across to both children and adults that oral tobacco products are dangerous in whatever form they are taken. I shall go on to describe the Government's wider tobacco control campaign.

We need to take a three-pronged approach. First, we must find out the scale of the problem. Secondly, we should consider the law and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Watford said so poignantly, better enforcement of existing law. Thirdly, we must examine education and how we can get our health messages over more effectively to this audience.

On the scale of the problem, although we have some information on tobacco chewing habits, it is by no means comprehensive and we are looking at ways of improving our knowledge. I have asked my officials to consider what more we can do. I want to know how prevalent oral tobacco use is among children and adults. Beyond survey evidence, I am also anxious to hear from experts. My hon. Friend recently wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), offering her an opportunity to meet surgeons who deal with the effects of oral tobacco every day. We are grateful to her for that and my hon. Friend would like that meeting to take place before Christmas.

We need to enforce the powers that are available. I remind hon. Members that legislation to prevent the sale of tobacco products to children has been on the statute book since 1908. The Children and Young Persons (Protection from Tobacco) Act 1991 strengthened the law and made it an offence to sell any tobacco product to children. The definition of tobacco product included any product containing tobacco intended for oral or nasal use. I was struck by what my hon. Friend the Member for Watford said about whether a product could be chewed or used in another way, and I was reminded of the sophistry that one may smoke but not inhale. We must look at the product rather than make distinctions between uses that would be difficult to regulate.

Local authorities are required to review their enforcement of the law annually. The law also requires tobacco retailers to display a warning notice at the point of sale which states that it is illegal to sell tobacco products to anyone under the age of 16. As a mother of a 13-year-old and a 16-year-old, I appreciate how difficult it is to judge the ages of children just by looking at them.

Under the Tobacco Products Labelling (Safety) Amendment Regulations 1993, all tobacco products are required to carry a health warning. There is, however, little evidence that that requirement is being observed by manufacturers and retailers of gutkha-style products. I assure the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) that the draft directive on tobacco labelling will require the health warnings on packets of tobacco products to be bigger.

Sir Peter Emery: When will that come about?

Ms Stuart: The precise date has not been determined, but I shall write to the right hon. Gentleman with precise details. I am sure that he is aware that matters European can take longer to implement.

There is little evidence that labelling requirements for gutkha-style products are being observed by manufacturers. The legal position is not clear. No child should be sold a tobacco product, whether it be cigarettes, gutkha or other forms of oral tobacco. Any tobacco product should carry a health warning, but the key to the problem is enforcement of the law, which is not always straightforward—for example, not all gutkha contains tobacco—hence the lack of prosecution. However, I am not here to make excuses; we must do better.

We are tackling the problem in several ways. First, I have asked my officials to consider whether, in principle, more could be done through legislation to remove items from the reach of children. Secondly, my officials have been working with the Local Authorities Co-ordinating Body on Trading Standards—LACOTS—for several months. They are developing an enforcement protocol to assess current compliance with the law; to provide education and help for retailers to aid compliance; to produce details of enforcement action taken so that it can act as a deterrent; to consider test purchases and support for proof-of-age cards; and to monitor the results of enforcement action. We expect the protocol to be published shortly. I accept what my hon. Friend the Member for Watford said about funding, but there is the issue of what priorities local authorities give to different aspects of trading standards enforcement. I hope that the meetings between officials and representatives of local authorities will encourage local authorities to return that to the top of their agenda. We are committed to running several training days next year for local trading standards officers on tobacco-related enforcement issues. Those training days will include the issues surrounding gutkha.

The Government have worked constructively with industry to find a solution to the problem of sales of adult products to children. An industry-led voluntary proof-of-age card is now available to help consumers and retailers to establish young people's age when they try to buy age-restricted products. Citizencard, which was launched nationally last February and covers ages 12 to 18 plus, is run by industry groups and has ministerial endorsement.

My officials have already alerted LACOTS to the situation concerning gutkha. They will discuss with them this week what more can be done and where resources can best be targeted to make an impact. For example, we shall consider how to encourage the prosecution of importers who fail to abide by existing labelling regulations. Those regulations make it clear that no person shall supply, offer to supply or possess for supply any tobacco product that does not confirm with labelling requirements.

Ms Ward: Does the Minister agree that products with children's faces on the packet cannot be considered to be normal adult consumable products and must be targeted at children? Such products must surely be in line for a ban.

Ms Stuart: The whole labelling issue and how products are made attractive to children will be considered as a package, but a starting point is to deal with products that do not even carry the necessary warning.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer stated in his pre-Budget statement the Government's commitment to take further action to tackle smuggling—for example, investment in new technology such as X-ray scanners and vigorous use of confiscating powers.

The third part of our action plan is education. There is considerable evidence that the people using these products are unaware of the health risks. We must get the message across that all tobacco products are harmful, however they are packaged. A three-year, £50 million tobacco education campaign will be launched on 13 December. The campaign materials will be translated into 11 languages. As time moves on, we shall incorporate a number of more targeted campaigns, including programmes aimed at ethnic minority populations.

There is much to be done. Few people are unaware that cigarette smoking is dangerous, although there is still much ignorance about how great the risks are. Unfortunately, knowledge about the health risks of oral tobacco is not so high. Some excellent services exist—for example, Quit's Asian Quitline—but not enough of them. We must make it clear to both adults and children that taking oral tobacco is a big risk to health. The terrible effects of facial cancers are frightening enough, but we must make it clear that the danger does not end there. Nicotine addiction from chewing tobacco can lead to cigarette smoking with its huge risk of cancer, heart disease and other deadly health problems. We hope that children will take our health messages home and thereby help us to reach their parents and grandparents.

Smoking kills. That is a simple and important message. I do not want the problem and the Government's reaction to it to be seen in isolation. I have referred to the tobacco education campaign, which aims to persuade smokers to quit and non-smokers not to start—especially the young and above all young women. Another matter of great concern is the high number of pregnant women who continue to smoke.

We shall develop programmes aimed at youngsters. We know that such campaigns have an impact on the wider adult population. We are determined, despite recent challenges, to ban tobacco advertising and we know that the cigarettes most often smoked by children are those that are most heavily advertised.

I am grateful for the success of the hon. Member for Watford in securing this Adjournment debate and hope that she is satisfied with some of our responses.

Pensions Mis-selling

12.29 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): It is a privilege to be able to round off the first day's proceedings in this very pleasantly appointed new Chamber. Moreover, it is a considerable advantage to Members to have a desk on which to distribute their papers in a case as complicated as this.

Had my constituent been Mr. T. Blair, he might have had less difficulty in resolving a case that has now lasted for nearly six years. In 26 years as a Member of this House, I have never seen a worse case of bureaucratic lassitude, incompetence, delay and serial buck-passing than this one. Its victim, Mr. William Blair, is a caring and patient man, who is amazingly calm and rational in the face of treatment that would try the patience of a saint. We have become good friends, as he has become a regular visitor to my constituency surgery over the years, during which we have tried to resolve it. I am grateful to yet another Minister for entering into the fray and trying to assist in dealing with a matter for which the Government have some responsibility, as they are seeking to sort out the mess left by pension mis-selling.

Mr. Blair was a miner in the Northumberland coalfield and a member of the mineworkers pension scheme. In the 1980s, the then Government loosened restrictions on company pension regimes and more than 5 million personal pensions were aggressively sold. Some advisers went round miners, nurses and other groups, trying to persuade them to take out personal pensions. I detect the flavour of that in a letter from the advisers in this case, Ridley Devine and company, of Ponteland, who wrote to Mr. Blair in 1989, to say:

"With no further increases and a fairly modest growth of 13 per cent., you would have £12,800 tax-free cash and a pension of around £100 a week."

If the Economic Secretary could guarantee 13 per cent. growth on equity investments and pensions, she would be very pleased. The letter ends:

"I would also like to take this opportunity to wish you a very merry Christmas and a happy new year."

Mr. Blair faced many years of anxiety following that letter and that advice. The only question that the advisers asked him was whether he could afford the premiums, which is in breach of all the guidance about how pensions should be sold.

Like many other miners in Northumberland, Mr. Blair had to leave the industry and he began working for Northumberland county council. He then transferred his Scottish Life pension to the Northumberland county council local government superannuation scheme. However, he discovered that, had he kept his miners pension and transferred it directly instead of transferring a personal pension, he would have been credited with more years of service than under the new pension, and been much better off in retirement.

Following that discovery, he approached me in February 1994. I offered to take up the matter with the regulatory authority, but he then appeared to make some progress, and the county council advised him to contact the mineworkers pension scheme. In December 1994, the pension provider, Scottish Life, confirmed that

Mr. Blair had bought a pension from it, but insisted that Bain Hogg, the company that had taken over Ridley Devine, was responsible for review under the Personal Investment Authority rules. The PIA confirmed that to me. I wrote to the director of Bain Hogg, who passed the file on to the company's compliance officer. Bain Hogg then became Hogg Robinson Financial Services, regulated by the PIA.

In February 1995, I wrote to Hogg Robinson's compliance officer, whose reply anticipated a final response in two weeks. In March 1995, Hogg Robinson wrote to Mr. Blair requesting further details. In May 1995, it interviewed him, and had at least, by then, worked out that he was four years and one month short of pension entitlement. It wrote to the local authority superannuation scheme for an assessment of the benefits that he would have received. That takes us to May 1995, when Philip Smith, a director of Hogg Robinson, wrote to me:

"I wish to confirm that the case is proceeding quite quickly."

In May 1995, Hogg Robinson offered to pay to Northumberland county council the amount that Mr. Blair had lost by not staying in the mineworkers pension scheme. However, Northumberland county council then put a spanner in the works by saying that it could not accept payments to boost pension entitlements and that Mr. Blair had therefore to transfer back into the mineworkers pension scheme. So after a year and a half, yet another impasse was reached. Hogg Robinson approached the mineworkers pension scheme and passed the case on to its northern executive director, and contact continued.

In August 1996, Hogg Robinson requested Mr. Blair's reinstatement into the mineworkers pension scheme, with an additional payment to be offered for stress and distress. A dispute arose between Mr. Blair and Hogg Robinson as to the amount to which he was entitled. Mr. Blair thought that £1,000 would be reasonable compensation and that that was the PIA-recommended figure. Now only £250 stood between Mr. Blair and a resolution of the matter.

Then a bombshell fell. Hogg Robinson's company secretary insisted that the company had no liability to reinstate Mr. Blair into the pension scheme because it had taken over not the share capital or liabilities of Ridley Devine, the original advisers, but merely its portfolio, and was therefore wholly unconnected with the people who gave the original advice. The papers then had to be passed to the PIA, with apologies for the appalling state of the file.

I then wrote to Colette Bowe—a name that you may remember, Mr. Deputy Speaker—who was at that time the chief executive of the PIA. She replied that she hoped that the PIA would be able to achieve a speedy resolution.

In March 1997, I again wrote to the Insurance Brokers Registration Council, the body that was now entrusted with the case and was reviewing the pension transfer. In April 1997, it completed its preliminary inquiries.

In June 1997, I wrote to the PIA to complain that it had still not resolved the case, suggesting that its handling of the case illustrated

"the hopeless ineffectiveness of the system of redress over which the PIA presides".

It was at about that time that *The Observer* had reported that the PIA pensions unit had so far compensated only one victim of pension mis-selling. When Colette Bowe replied to my letter, she said that my comments were "misconceived and unfair".

At that point, I wrote to the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), who was then Economic Secretary of the Treasury, asking for her help in looking into the case. In September 1997, she replied that swift action was necessary in such cases and that she had met senior representatives of the life insurance companies and other bodies to insist that it be taken. Also in September 1997, the IBRC appointed independent accountants to review the file.

In December 1997, there was a new development. With the case still unresolved, Mr. Blair faced redundancy from his job. I wrote to the IBRC. The respondent replied that the IBRC was awaiting a report from its actuary, and that

"I anticipate that this may be forthcoming shortly."

By March 1998, I had heard nothing since that response from the IBRC in December 1997. Its independent reviewers of the case had provided estimates for benefits on the basis of redundancy, but as Mr. Blair had not been made redundant at that point they had to go back to the beginning again to work out a fresh entitlement.

In July 1998, the Government announced that they intended to abolish the IBRC, which gave the IBRC a wonderful excuse to pass the papers on to somebody else. At that point, I recruited the help of the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), who was a council member of the IBRC. I am grateful for the time and attention that he gave to the matter. At about the same time, I requested a meeting with the new Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt). Following that meeting, she wrote to the chairman of the Financial Services Authority about the case.

In the meantime, I again wrote to the IBRC, which, although it was about to be abolished, was still in existence. In March 1999, it confirmed that it had passed the file on to the FSA. Enter Mr. Howard Davies—another name that you will remember, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When I raised the matter with him, he said:

"The Unit hopes that they will be able to conclude this assessment within one month."

However, he also said that it would have to be dealt with by the IBRC—which was of course in the process of being abolished. The FSA and the IBRC would have to discuss arrangements for meeting the costs of compensation claims from investors who did business with firms that the IBRC used to regulate.

The FSA then assured me that the assessment would be completed by mid-May 1999 at the latest. Of course, by that time I had heard nothing further about the assessment or anything else. I wrote again to Mr. Howard Davies, who assured me that the assessment had been completed, but that the FSA was awaiting the outcome of talks between the IBRC and the investors compensation scheme about how such claims would be dealt with. In July this year, the hon. Member for Ryedale, who has been involved in negotiations to establish such a scheme, informed me that the IBRC, the ICS and the FSA had agreed in principle a

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

compensation scheme for investors such as Mr. Blair. The PIA is passing its pension files to the ICS. The hon. Gentleman made inquiries about the location of Mr. Blair's files.

By September, the ICS received the file, and it sent another set of forms to Mr. Blair to fill in—it appeared that he had to start from the beginning again. It told Mr. Blair that it would carry out a full investigation, which would be a

"detailed and lengthy process which may take some time".

Its representative even said:

"Unfortunately, I am unable to give any specific time frame as to when we will be in a position to review your claim."

Mr. Blair has waited for nearly six years and his case has gone through a series of bodies, but the body that is responsible for such matters cannot even give a time scale within which it will deal with the case. That ICS letter made me realise that I had to raise the case in the House or in Westminster Hall and take it further. Since then, Mr. Blair has had to agree to retire in January on grounds of ill-health. The case has acquired much greater urgency because his pension will form the basis of his retirement income.

Yesterday—surprise, surprise—the ICS phoned Mr. Blair to say that his case would probably be resolved on the basis of a gratuity because there were technical reasons why he could not be returned to the mineworkers pension scheme. In view of the history of the case, neither Mr. Blair nor I place any confidence whatever in such telephone assurances, although I notice that the file has been dug out and that someone might be working on it. However, no assurances are on paper, and I fear that even the offer of a gratuity will be snatched away.

If the gratuity is given to Mr. Blair, various questions need to be answered. Will it be index-linked? His original mineworkers pension would have been index-linked, if he had kept it. Will the gratuity include compensation for all the distress and anxiety that Mr. Blair has been caused for many years? We should remember that compensation of £750 was on the table in 1996, and that he has suffered three and a half years of further distress since then.

Howard Davies sent me a letter in April 1999 in which he said:

"any compensation paid to Mr. Blair will take account of all the delays he has experienced."

I sincerely hope that someone somewhere will assure us that the ICS will be bound by Mr. Davies' assurance that compensation will be forthcoming.

I appreciate that the Minister bears no personal responsibility for this appalling state of affairs. However, she is responsible for regulation in such areas and for ensuring that the system works effectively. Clearly, the system worked hopelessly and was lamentably ineffective in this case. What has she been told will happen next in Mr. Blair's case? I am sure that she sought information on it—no doubt that is why he got a telephone call yesterday. Will she keep an eye on the case until it is resolved? Although she is not responsible for individual cases, this case is a vivid example of the way in which the system can go wrong. She should follow it through and ensure that the wrongdoing is put right. Has the case taught her any lessons about the system's effectiveness? I should be grateful for any assistance that she can give me and the long-suffering Mr. Blair.

12.43 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) on securing the debate and on fighting so hard for his constituent. Before I respond to his speech, it might be helpful if I remind hon. Members about the progress that we have made in tackling the pensions mis-selling scandal that we inherited when we took office. To some degree, that sets the scene for Mr. Blair's case, to which I shall return later.

The situation in spring 1997 was that firms had not given the review that was launched in 1994 anything like the necessary priority. The target was to compensate all priority cases—those who had retired or were close to retiring—by December 1996. However, by March 1997, only 15 per cent. of cases identified for review had been resolved, and only 2 per cent. had been compensated.

The Government wasted no time in getting to grips with the overall problem. In May 1997, the then Economic Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), met senior executives from the 24 firms that were responsible for about three quarters of all cases to secure their personal commitment to giving the review a higher priority within their organisations. I am pleased to say that phase 1 of the pensions mis-selling review, which covers priority cases, is now almost complete. So far, more than 400,000 people who were mis-sold a pension have been offered, or have accepted, redress worth £2.7 billion. Firms now recognise that it is in their interests to complete any outstanding phase 1 reviews as soon as possible. The Government and regulator reinforce that message in their dealings. We have made it clear that firms also need to make speedy progress with phase 2. We will not tolerate the delays associated with the early days of the priority review; with the lessons to be learned from phase 1, there will be fewer excuses.

The Government have no plans to publish information on firms' progress on phase 2, as we did in respect of phase 1, but the industry is aware that we reserve the right to do so if necessary. We continue to support the regulator's action to ensure that all victims of personal pensions mis-selling receive appropriate redress.

The Financial Services and Markets Bill, on which I have just participated in Standing Committee deliberations, will deliver a regulatory regime that will make it more difficult for firms to mis-sell financial products. The Financial Services Authority's programme of raising consumer awareness will include the publishing of comparative information on financial products—the so-called league tables—and help consumers to make better informed choices. These measures are designed to ensure that scandals such as the mis-selling of personal pensions are not repeated. That is the most important lesson that we can draw.

Having listened to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, I understand the frustration that

he feels on Mr. Blair's behalf. Mr. Blair first took up the issue in 1994, and it is regrettable that he has yet to hear the outcome of his case, particularly given that it seemed close to being settled on two previous occasions. The Government are aware of the time that has been taken to clear up some cases. That delay is a result of the complexity of the process and the number of organisations involved. On the regulatory side alone, the organisations include the FSA, the Insurance Brokers Registration Council and its grant scheme, the Personal Investment Authority and the investors compensation scheme. Those are all dedicated organisations that have done good work to help and protect savers, but it is clear that people such as Mr. Blair have suffered unacceptably. First and foremost, he suffered because of the initial mis-selling of the pension. That was bad enough. He then suffered because of the time taken to resolve uncertainties about compensation. Would he receive redress? How much would it be? When would an offer be made?

Resolving complex cases such as Mr. Blair's was bound to take time, because the extent of the loss suffered needs to be quantified and an entitlement to redress established. However, such work cannot be done in a hurry without, for example, information from existing and past schemes. Of course, as the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed clearly stated, the process has not been helped by the number of organisations involved and the manner in which they exchanged information.

Moreover, in this case, the pension was mis-sold by a small firm that went out of business several years ago. That necessitated some one-off detective work to establish what had become of the firm. Dependent on the outcome of that work is the vital question of whether Mr. Blair is entitled to redress from the investors compensation scheme.

That is the system that we inherited, and which continues to apply. To simplify the arrangements, the Financial Services and Markets Bill will establish a single financial services and markets compensation scheme, which will pay compensation to consumers who suffer financial loss when an authorised firm cannot meet its liabilities. That will make compensation easier and simpler to obtain in such cases.

All that is of little comfort to Mr. Blair. His case reached the existing investors compensation scheme in late August this year, and action can take up to six months. The Financial Services Authority's pensions unit sought to keep Mr. Blair informed about what has been happening this year. The ICS 1999 report acknowledged that

> "Without establishing the insolvency of the firm, we are unable to take the claims further. This was, at times, a lengthy and cumbersome process".

The case is being dealt with by the ICS and is at a final stage. It has sought to keep Mr. Blair fully informed on what is happening, and has been in touch with him in the past few days.

I am pleased to be able to tell the right hon. Gentleman news of the results of the investors compensation scheme review today. The ICS is satisfied that Mr. Blair is entitled to receive redress. The amount of that redress, and the manner in which it is to be paid, remains to be finalised in detail. The purpose of that redress is to put him, as far as possible, in the position in which he would have been had the mis-selling not taken place. That is his right. ICS staff have spoken to Mr. Blair and discussed what form the redress might take. Usually, reinstatement or augmentation of the existing pension arrangement would be sought, although that might not be possible in Mr. Blair's case, for the reasons given by the right hon. Gentleman. That will be disappointing, but it is because of the policies adopted by his other pension schemes. Instead, the ICS will probably buy an annuity to compensate Mr. Blair for any future losses.

Mr. Blair was pleased to know that his claim was finally progressing. The ICS knows that I will continue to take a close interest in his case, and I also give that assurance to the right hon. Gentleman. Mr. Blair has had to wait far too long, and I am glad that the ICS has been in touch with him to provide good news.

Mr. Beith: Can the Minister confirm, or at least show an interest in, the compensation aspect, to which I referred earlier? Taking account of indexation means that putting Mr. Blair in the position in which he would have been is difficult enough. However, it is also important that the assurances given by Howard Davies and others in relation to compensation for all the delay and distress that have occurred are kept to by the ICS, which is not the body that originally gave them.

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I shall write to him in greater detail on the compensation issue, although I assure him that I continue to take an active interest in it.

It is a tribute to the right hon. Gentleman that he has fought so hard and long for his constitutent. Some hon. Members have not been in Parliament long enough to have fought for such a length of time, but certain cases have to be fought persistently. Any Member of Parliament who sustains a battle on behalf of a constituent for such a long period should be congratulated. In securing this debate, the right hon. Gentleman has achieved some progress. I hope that the case can soon be brought to a conclusion that is satisfactory to him and to Mr. Blair.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): I hope that I can express the view that this first sitting in Westminster Hall has been constructive, interesting and civilised.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at six minutes to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 1 December 1999

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

NHS Dentistry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

9.30 am

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): I am pleased to have secured this debate on a matter of great concern in my constituency and to many other hon. Members, who may try to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The House last debated NHS dentistry when my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) initiated a debate on the subject in 1998. Sadly, little has changed since then, and in Somerset the position has worsened. In 1998, 10 out of 71 practices accepted new adult registrations on the NHS; today only five do so. In 1998, 72 per cent. of children in Somerset were registered with a dentist; today, that figure is 70 per cent. In 1998, 63 per cent. of adults in Somerset were registered; today, only 49 per cent. are registered.

Many of the dentists who accept NHS patients have a much higher than average list, so waiting time is increasing. In 1998, 200 people called the dentists' telephone helpline each week because of problems with accessing an NHS dentist; today, the number of calls has doubled. In 1998, only two practices in my constituency were taking new NHS patients, and I complained about that at the time; now, there are none in my constituency.

Many people, especially in the more rural parts of my constituency, have no access to NHS dentistry unless they travel long distances.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): As my hon. Friend knows, my constituency borders hers and I have the same problem. Only one dentist is accepting NHS patients, who may have to travel for one hour to reach a dentist. The initiative that we were promised to solve that problem has done nothing to improve matters. In fact, they have got worse.

Jackie Ballard: I thank my hon. Friend. I shall refer to the investing in dentistry initiative later.

As my hon. Friend said, many people must travel long distances to reach a dentist and, in a rural county, 11 miles may be a very long distance for someone without easy access to transport. For people living in Wellington in the south of my constituency, the nearest dentist who is taking patients is in Cullompton, which is in Devon. For people living in Taunton, the nearest dentist is 25 miles away in Minehead, and Taunton is the county town of Somerset. Those who rely on public transport—the elderly, the poor, the most vulnerable and those who cannot drive—are disadvantaged, and inequalities in health are worsened. The Labour party manifeso promised that access to NHS services would be based on need and need alone. Clearly, in many parts of the country, access is dependent on transport, finance and mobility, not on need alone.

In many parts of the United Kingdom, NHS dentists are becoming as rare as hens' teeth. Dental services are now a lottery of postcode and geography. Dentistry is being rationed, and that has happened by stealth, not by Government decree or after public consultation. We do not have a national dental service. The previous Government seemed to be content to allow that. During their 18 years in power, there was a steady erosion of access to NHS dentistry, with a reduction in the services provided on the NHS and a drop in the number of people registered with an NHS dentist.

I became interested in the subject long before I was elected to the House. In 1991, I was deregistered by my dentist because the fee structure made it difficult for him to repay his practice loan, earn a living and provide a high-quality service. When I raised the matter in the local press, I was denigrated by the local Tories who, with their usual grasp on reality, said "Problem! What problem?"

People who pay national insurance contributions for many years think that it is a sort of insurance policy which enables them to use the NHS when they need it. We know that national insurance does not work like that, but that is the impression that many people have, and they feel cheated. I hope that the Minister will not brush aside my anxiety and that of other hon. Members, or deny that there is a problem. I hope that he will be able to assure us that he is committed, not just in theory but in practice, to dentistry as a core part of the national health service.

The Government cannot expect dentists to make a commitment to the NHS unless they too make a commitment and spell it out clearly. For example, the Government promised to publish a dental strategy later this year, but, according to a recent parliamentary answer, publication is now expected in the new year. Perhaps the Minister will be more specific this morning.

After the debate in 1998, I received a letter from a local dentist, stating:

> "The morning I received your letter I took thirty minutes to surgically remove an abscessed tooth under NHS regulations. The fee was £25.90, of which the patient paid £20.72. After deduction of expenses I receive £5.90 before tax. I regard this as completely inadequate remuneration. A hospital referral would cost the NHS several hundred pounds and the patient would receive their treatment free of charge. This is an intolerable situation."

I emphasise that the fee received by the dentist before tax was £5.90 for half an hour's work. I do not believe that any of us in the House would do half an hour's work for £5.90. [*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) is prepared to sell himself cheaply. Not surprisingly, the dentist who wrote to me is no longer taking new NHS patients.

Dental health should be an integral part of primary care. I am disappointed that many primary care groups do not seem to involve local dental practitioners. Oral and dental health is mentioned in health improvement plans, but without easy and affordable access to NHS dentistry, the nation's oral health will decline.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that dental provision in the NHS is omitted from primary care strategy almost altogether and has been virtually forgotten by many people in rural areas?

Jackie Ballard: When we debated the setting up of primary care groups, I remember the Minister saying

[Jackie Ballard]

that dental practitioners should be an integral part of the primary care groups and their service. That is certainly not happening in my part of the country, and I do not believe that it is happening elsewhere. I hope that something can be done to encourage primary care groups to include dental practitioners.

Mr. David Heath: And optometrists.

Jackie Ballard: I shall not stray into the realm of eyes, although I realise that they usually go with teeth.

Oral examination is important. In Britain, there are as many deaths from oral cancer as from cervical cancer and skin cancer. Dentists can spot the early signs of oral cancer. I have been told by local general practitioners that there has been an increasing demand on their time because of poor oral hygiene, gum disease and mouth infection, which would previously have been seen at an earlier stage and prevented by dentists. Only this week I received a letter from a GP in my constituency, who stated:

"I very much support your attempts to improve access to NHS dentistry. As a GP I must admit to being very fed up with having to sort out people with dental problems who cannot access a dentist, either because they have not registered with an NHS dentist or they are not prepared to pay dentistry fees. In particular it is acute dental infections which cause problems. From my point of view the most important aspect of this is that dentists should be able to provide 24 hour emergency care."

Another GP wrote to me stating:

"I share your concern about NHS dentistry. It is amazing how a Government can quietly see the service disappear without any hue and cry."

My local GP out-of-hours co-operative, Deane Doctor, reports a 25 per cent. increase this year in the number of calls related to dental problems. The simple fact is that decay and infection will not go away without treatment and, if that treatment is not easily accessible from a dentist, people will go to their general practitioner, adding to the pressure of work which they are already under.

In Somerset, 51 per cent. of adults are not registered with a dentist. Others, like many in my constituency, were registered and seeing their dentist on a regular basis, but recently, out of the blue, received a letter telling them that their dentist would no longer see NHS patients, that there were no vacancies with other dentists in the practice and that patients therefore had the choice of paying into a private dental health plan or registering with a dentist 20 or 25 miles away. In those circumstances, many people will not register, but wait until they have an emergency. Not only will their dental and general health decline as a result, but they will find that emergency treatment is not available in Taunton; they will have to travel far to find it.

In responding to the debate, I am sure that the Minister will draw attention to the investing in dentistry initiative, which the Government have introduced to improve access. Coincidentally, the day that I learned that I had secured this debate—I believe in coincidences—the Secretary of State for Health sent a letter to all hon. Members, in which he said that the initiative had spent £10 million on the expansion of NHS dental practices. However, two years ago, the British Dental Association said that £40 million was needed to reverse the decline in the number of NHS dentists and the problem of access to dentistry. When the scheme was introduced, the then Minister said that it would improve the availability of general dental services and extend the benefits of good oral health by focusing help on the areas with the most serious problems.

The Minister knows that Somerset has a particular problem. I am sure that he will tell us how much has been spent in Somerset, but I know those figures. Bids totalling more than £800,000 went to the Department of Health from Somerset health authority, but only £200,000 has come into the area under the investing in dentistry scheme. In my constituency, a bid for a new surgery was rejected, as was a bid for a new computer system. A new surgery was approved, but that bid has not been taken up because of difficulties in recruiting dentists. Another bid for a new surgery was rejected and a further bid for a new practice was approved, inasmuch as £15,000 of a £25,000 bid was accepted.

The investing in dentistry scheme has clearly had a minimal effect in my constituency; it has not even stopped the decline. The problems in my constituency go back eight or nine years. Therefore, is the Minister content that the scheme has focused help on the areas with the most serious problems?

Before the general election, the Labour party said that NHS dentistry was in crisis. At Prime Minister's Question Time on 15 October 1996, the then Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair), said that he did not know how the Prime Minister could

"dare mention dentistry in the national health service after what his Government have done to it."—[*Official Report*, 15 October 1996; Vol. 282, c. 584.]

However, in responding to an Adjournment debate in 1998, the then Minister, now the Secretary of State for Health, said:

"we must not create a crisis out of a problem."—[*Official Report*, 18 February 1998; Vol. 306, c. 1161.]

Before the general election, Labour Members believed that there was a crisis, but by 1998, they believed that it was just a problem. I do not know how the Minister can think that the crisis ended in 1997. If he does not think that there is a crisis when my constituents are deregistered by their dentists, for whatever reason, or when people move into the area and cannot find a dentist to take them as an NHS patient, I hope that he thinks that it is a problem that he must solve sooner rather than later.

The Department of Health is piloting phone-and-go dental access centres, but my constituents will not be amused to phone and be told to go 20 miles. I hope that the Minister will tell us his definition of a reasonable distance that people should be asked to travel to a dentist. I hope that the debate will enable hon. Members to tell the Minister of their concerns, so that he can tell us, and our constituents, how and when he intends to improve access to NHS dentistry.

9.44 am

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I congratulate the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) on securing this morning's debate, which is taking place in a format that I hope the Minister will not

find too painful. He is here with all of us to try to find a solution to the problem that we have inherited from the previous Government. I shall frame my speech in the context of that inheritance. No matter how painful finding a solution might be, we must do so simply because of the cuts in NHS dentistry that have taken place during the past 18 years. Several changes in dental provision have occurred in recent years.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Is the hon. Lady aware that there were 4,500 more NHS dentists when the previous Government left office than when they took office, and that spending on NHS dentistry was 60 per cent. higher in real terms than in 1979?

Ms Walley: The important issue is access to NHS dentists for those who need treatment. From birth, people should receive regular preventive dental care and treatment when they need it.

The dental registration scheme which was introduced as part of the new 1990 NHS dental contract has caused the crisis that we have inherited. Following those changes, the number of children and adults registering was much higher than the then Government expected, so a 7 per cent. cut in fees was soon introduced. That consitituted a threat to withhold approximately £15,000 in earnings from each dentist and was due to an overspend. The hon. Gentleman must consider the effects of his party's policies, which changed the formula and the basis on which dentistry had traditionally been agreed. For that reason, we must accept that we have inherited a crisis and turn to the future to discover what needs to be done.

The core of the problem is that, in those areas where access to NHS dental care is not easy, people are angry. They are often in pain and that grim problem should not be tolerated. We must do something about it. Dentists have been squeezed by the formula. The cost of the treatment that they provide must be looked at; dentists must have the time and funds to provide the necessary treatment.

The problem is not necessarily one of too few dentists, but one of too few NHS dentists, especially in the areas of highest need—the postcode syndrome. Access to treatment is unequal, and I implore the Minister to take urgent, considered action. He should decide on the strategy that is needed in the long term in the context of the forthcoming comprehensive spending review.

The hon. Member for Taunton gave a thorough introduction to the debate. We heard that the investing in dentistry scheme was launched in 1997 and that, initially, £9 million was made available for it. We in north Staffordshire expected that that funding would make a difference to the problem that we had inherited. However, only £175,000 was paid out in the first year of the scheme, despite a provisional allocation of £9 million. I accept that an additional £10 million was made available in the following financial year. The problems of launching that new system emphasise how difficult it is to set up new facilities, especially given the training and other cuts that have taken place during a sustained period over the previous 18 years. It takes time for such schemes to make a real difference.

I am pleased that 10 practices in north Staffordshire, out of the 310 practices nationwide, were successful under the investing in dentistry scheme, but that is a drop in the ocean and the problems of north Staffordshire remain. I make no apology for being parochial and speaking about the problems that my constituents face in being unable to get to an NHS dentist.

I draw the Minister's attention to the further problem of the recruitment and retention of dentists. In north Staffordshire, the health authority has appointed a designated officer to address that problem. Much innovative work has been done to encourage people in dental schools to move to north Staffordshire. North Staffordshire does not have the necessary training places, and people often practise in the area where they trained. If there are no dental training facilities in a particular area, that area will find it even more difficult to recruit and retain people. However, in the past few months, our health authority has funded one third of the educational element of a vocational training scheme based in Crewe. We have high hopes that, after one year of vocational training based in north Staffordshire, two practitioner trainees will continue to practise after completing their educational qualifications. Two practitioners, however, is a drop in the ocean. It does not solve the problem, although I admit that it is a tiny step forward.

I should like to concentrate briefly on the scale of the problem in north Staffordshire. In the week beginning 12 September, a constituent who had suffered intense toothache for about four weeks and was unable to find a dentist consulted north Staffordshire's emergency advisory services. She was given a list of NHS dentists practising in my constituency, one of whom was available to see her, but in four weeks' time. That is termed an emergency service. The constituent was provided with pain-killing relief, but was able to obtain an earlier appointment—only because of my intervention. That should not happen.

We have already heard how not receiving treatment at the right time can lead to far greater dental problems, and greater recourse to general practitioners. Anyone who is in immediate pain should be given emergency treatment; otherwise, the problem will be exacerbated. I am greatly concerned about the human suffering that results from the lack of NHS dentists where they are needed.

In statistical terms, north Staffordshire has a poor dentist to population ratio—1:4,100. The ratio for England and Wales is 1:3,045, and that for the west midlands is 1:3,597. North Staffordshire's adult registration rate is the lowest in the west midlands. I take no pride in that whatever. It is also significantly lower than the average in England and Wales. The England and Wales average is 45 per cent.; ours is 38 per cent.Therefore, one in six people in north Staffordshire is not registered with a dentist, which shows the scale of the problem. A dental advice line monitors where calls come from, and a disproportionate number—650 to 710 a month—come from what is defined as the north Stoke area.

Applications are being made for third wave personal dental service pilots. When the health authority bidding is assessed, it is crucial that the Government should consider north Staffordshire's need for that pilot. The success of the bid on its own will be insufficient; again, it will be a drop in the ocean. We want a formula whereby

[Ms Walley]

patients can be registered with dentists, allowing a link-up with the sure start programme. That will ensure that children are registered from the start of their lives through to old age. A strategy to link with primary care groups is also urgently needed. I recently met the chairman of the primary care group in my constituency, and the chairman and chief executive of the health authority, and it is crucial that a dental strategy should be built into primary care groups.

When the Minister considers our personal dental service pilot bid on which I hope that he will look favourably, will he also consider the long term? Will he consider north Staffordshire as a pilot area? We need to start to think about how to make NHS dental services available to the 63 per cent. of people in north Staffordshire who are not registered. Joined-up thinking with other Departments would enable a link with the sure start scheme and the new primary care groups.

We must also consider how to ensure that children receive the dental care that they need. In the next few months, a national debate on fluoridation will take place. I would much prefer that debate to take place after we have been assured that everybody has the right access to NHS dental care.

9.56 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard)—who is also my neighbour—on securing this extremely important debate. Had she not secured it, I would have sought to do so in the coming weeks. The situation in Somerset, which she has already described, is becoming worse by the day. Sometimes hon. Members are guilty of hyperbole, but, in the past two weeks, people have come to my surgeries to tell me about two practices in my area that have reluctantly decided to move away from NHS dental work. Those practices have asked their patients to move on to private dental insurance, and the people affected are rightly worried.

This problem must be put in the overall context of health care provision in rural areas. It is difficult to access the health service if one lives in a rural area. Services that are taken for granted in urban areas and throughout most of the country are not available in much of rural Britain. That should concern all hon. Members, and the Minister will know, from his own constituency, what difficulties sparsely populated rural areas can present.

The situation in Somerset seems to be worse than elsewhere; I am sure that the Minister will confirm whether that is the case. The perception is that there has been a wholesale flight from NHS dentistry in Somerset. I am aware of only one practice in my constituency that is admitting NHS patients, and my constituency covers the best part of 900 square miles. As I said, many practices are moving patients from NHS lists on to private dental insurance arrangements.

The location of practices, which are few and far between anyway, is a problem. As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton mentioned, some people have to travel 25 or 30 miles to visit a dentist. It would be ridiculous if everyone in London was told to go to a dentist in Slough—the equivalent distance—and people would object. In our part of the world, however, travelling such a distance is considered normal. It is questionable whether there is genuine access if there is a complete absence of public transport. If the only way of getting to the dentist is by private car, many of the people who are most in need of dental check-ups will not be able to go because of inconvenience and inaccessibility.

The reason for that is, I suspect, based on a number of factors. I do not blame the dental practitioners in question, because many of them stopped providing NHS access with the greatest reluctance. They do not want to be private practitioners. They want to continue to provide the service that they have provided throughout their working lives, but the arrangements that govern their remuneration and practice are currently so unattractive that they feel unable to do so.

An article in the *Health Service Journal*, published on 9 September, examined why dentists move from NHS to private provision. It found that dentists have increased private provision principally to improve the quality of dentistry, to increase choice in clinical decision making, to get more time with patients and to widen the range of treatment options. Each of those reasons is, in effect, based on a clinical decision as to how to provide the best treatment for patients. Rightly or wrongly, dentists have concluded that they cannot provide such treatment in the context of the present NHS arrangements.

Financial security is also an important factor. It is difficult to run a small practice when one's remuneration fails to meet its overheads or enable it to work effectively, or when one seriously doubts whether that remuneration will continue. That is a particular problem for a dentist who, at some stage, intends to sell the practice because he or she wants to retire or move elsewhere, and who realises that it will not fetch a reasonable price as an NHS practice. Such a practice cannot be passed on because it will not provide a sufficient return on the necessary capital investment. Practitioners are concluding that their interests, and their patients' interests, do not lie in the provision of NHS care. At the same time, people desperately want access to NHS care, but the practitioners simply are not there.

The initiative that was announced two years ago with considerable fanfare may have achieved wonders across the country, but it has had a limited effect in my constituency, where the arrangements have been subject to further decay. People who move there are astonished. Recently, the wife of a Royal Air Force officer who is based at the Royal Naval air station in Yeovilton—somewhat confusingly, her husband is in a different service from the base at which he is stationed—was unable to find dental care. The Royal Navy would not provide dental care because she was RAF; nor would anyone else provide it. She had been moved to an area that she did not know at the behest of the Ministry of Defence, yet could not obtain dental care for her family. I had to write to the health authority and various other people to try to put her name on lists that were effectively closed. Such problems are encountered regularly .

I cannot stress sufficiently the importance of primary care across different disciplines. I know that you would rule me out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I were to stray too far into the world of optometry, in which I used to practise, but there are many parallels. If we fail to get primary care right, not only in general practice but in dentistry, optometry and other disciplines, we will not achieve the hoped-for reduction in disease, and we will see increased hospitalisation because diagnoses will not have been made at the appropriate point. In the long run, that will cost the Government and the health service more, and will subject people to inconvenience and distress that could have been avoided.

For heaven's sake, let us treat the matter as a major problem that needs urgent and serious attention. We must get NHS dentistry right and look at those areas where provision is bad. Provision in Somerset is particularly bad and requires the Minister's urgent and special attention. We must get the contracts right, so that we recruit and retain practitioners in health service practice. Perhaps we shall then provide the service that people reasonably expect from the NHS throughout the country, including rural areas, not just in areas that are lucky enough to have an abundance of practitioners.

10.6 am

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) on securing this debate. It is somewhat disappointing that all the examples that have so far been cited are from the west of England or, in my case, the south of England. For that reason, I was particularly pleased that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) contributed to the debate. It is not merely a question of localised pockets of difficulty; there is a national, structural problem with NHS dentistry.

The debate is particularly apt at the moment because dentistry may illustrate the direction in which the rest of the NHS is moving. There has been a covert move away from a publicly funded service, albeit with contributions from patients, to a purely private arrangement. Many of my friends in dentistry are extremely concerned about that. They feel a conflict between their social conscience, and their clinical and professional responsibility towards patients. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North said that registration may have caused the crisis, but that is wrong. Registration was a good idea. It created a link between dental practitioner and patient, and could have formed the basis of preventive dental care.

Some 15 years ago, enormous improvements were being made in the dental health of the whole population. The Isle of Wight was proud to have the lowest number of dental caries in children under 10. We regularly sample our school population, and I am sorry to say that that record has been completely ruined. The Isle of Wight now has one of the highest rates of dental caries in children. That is largely a result of changes in access to NHS dentistry. West Wight now has no national health dentist. The practice there closed down overnight, and people must now take a bus into the county town of Newport and travel to the depths of Ventnor or Cowes in the hope of finding a dentist. That constitutes a bus journey of about two and half hours, which is ridiculous.

It is clear that we need to make dentistry available and accessible to people everywhere, and there are two possible answers. We could take the view, which is overtly taken by the Conservative party, that the NHS can survive only with more insurance-based funding. Clearly, organisations such as Denplan, which have taken over the funding of NHS dentistry, may have a role to play, but the majority of my constituents cannot afford such a service. They truly believe that, having paid into the NHS, they are entitled to some care. The alternative answer, which is emerging from the Government's actions—

Mr. Hammond: In the light of the hon. Gentleman's comments, is he opposed to a mixed economy in dentistry, in which NHS dentists see NHS patients but can offer a menu of treatment that includes NHS options and options that are not available through the NHS? Does he see that as a positive or a negative step?

Dr. Brand: I am a firm believer in a mixed economy of provision. It is sad that, at the moment, the better dentists and those who are best equipped have moved away from the NHS. In the past, those people found it possible to mix their practice. The Government-based fee system can take time to catch up with reality, so their private work often helped them to invest in leading-edge technology. That is one of the problems at the moment. I have no problem with a mixed economy of provision, except when it is no longer mixed and becomes available only to those who can afford private insurance.

The Government's apparent solution to the problem is not to talk to dental practitioners to see how a contract can be devised to enable them to offer their services to NHS patients, but to supply a range of services through dentists directly employed by district or area health authorities. I do not have a problem with that if it is the Government's overt policy, but if that is the case, they should say so. If we are no longer to use independent dental practitioners to provide national health services, let us make sure that a comprehensive service is set up alongside them. It would be sad if that happened, because I agree with the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) that it is useful to have a mix within the same practice.

I have had extensive correspondence with my health authority over dental problems on behalf of my constituents. I was interested to learn that health authorities are not obliged to provide NHS dental care for patients other than those needing emergency treatment. This is ridiculous. It is 18th-century stuff. It is inadequate that the NHS is responsible only for yanking out teeth and putting in the occasional filling. So much can be done now to retain people's dentition throughout their lives. We seem to be going back to the pre-war set-up, when people were given an appointment with the dentist to have all their teeth out and receive a full set of dentures for their 30th birthday. It is disgraceful to deal with dental care by concentrating only on dental emergencies.

That policy also has a major effect in the medical field, not only by increasing the work load for general practitioners—all GPs moan about that, but they can cope with it. There is a real problem about the dental part of medical training. I think that I had two lectures on dentistry. Proper dentists spend five years studying,

[Dr. Brand]

and the average GP is not suited or trained to cope with dental problems. Doctors do, however, need help from their dental colleagues in cases of patients with heart disease—especially valvular heart disease—or other diseases that make it imperative that they should not suffer from oral sepsis. Such patients need regular access to dental hygienists and regular checks.

A great many of my constituents do not have access to such services. My health authority informs me that the new pilot dental service, to which it hopes to recruit people, will deal only with those needing emergency treatment, or those with learning difficulties—a special group that has always been catered for by the directly employed service.

We face a crisis in dentistry of successive Governments' making. The present Government owe it to the nation to say which course they wish to take. They must either reinvest the money that they are not currently spending on NHS dentistry into a comprehensive, directly employed, accountable service—there must be an honest debate about the advantages and disadvantages of that—or they must have meaningful discussions with general dental practitioners to ensure that they can once again offer their services in the NHS.

10.15 am

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) on securing this debate, which gives me the opportunity to experience for the first time the somewhat unusual sensation of standing in this Chamber. I was not quite sure where to sit when I came in, and I wonder whether we might be encouraged to change our positions depending on the nature of the debate, and on how close to, or far from, each other we feel on the subject. If it is anything to go by, I notice that today both the Minister and I have positioned ourselves as close to the centre as we reasonably could in the seating available.

The number of Members attending this debate is smaller than it might have been had the subject been debated on a Wednesday morning in the main Chamber. The distractions there are somewhat different for us, because if the debate tends to flag, one can always look at the Public Gallery. We do not have that option in this format, but there are buses passing outside, and a JCB busily working in Parliament square.

There are approximately 21,000 general dental practitioners providing NHS care in England and Wales. About three out of four adults registered with a dentist receive NHS care, while one in four is a private dental patient, often, but not always, through choice. Dentists derive 39 per cent. of their income from private treatment, which is a significantly increased percentage. Most of that increase is due to private work being carried out on NHS patients.

As I said in my earlier intervention on the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), we have achieved a genuine mixed economy among NHS dentists, where it is working properly, in which patients are able to access their dentist under the NHS, but, once the need for treatment has been determined, are offered a genuine menu of choices, including treatments that are available on the NHS and those that are not. I hope that hon. Members will agree with the hon. Member for Isle of Wight and me that more choice is always better than less, provided that it is a genuine choice. I accept the caveat that patients must have access to a dentist on the NHS in the first instance.

The scare stories that one reads, especially in the local and regional press, about there being no NHS dentists in an area are largely untrue. In reality, there is a population of mixed-practice dentists who are, in many cases, unwilling to expand their NHS lists. That does not mean that they have ceased to practise in the NHS altogether. It means that, having regard to the need to assure their own gross incomes—a point to which I shall return—in order to meet their practice overheads and to provide adequate care and time for their patients, they no longer feel able to take on additional NHS patients and remain viable at the current level of NHS fees for service.

That is the core of the problem about which most hon. Members are approached by constituents who are unable to access an NHS dentist as a new patient. The problem is probably getting worse. Half the health authorities in a recent British Dental Association survey reported that the shortage of accessible NHS dentists during the preceding year had worsened.

The number of adult patients registered with a dentist peaked at 24.8 million in 1993 and, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) said, has been falling since then. That is partly due to changes in the registration time limits. The fall put on its greatest spurt between December 1997 and December 1998, when the number registered fell from 22.3 million to 19.7 million. During 1997–98, the Government underspent their NHS dentistry budget by £56.5 million.

The BDA estimates that 20 million adults do not seek regular dental treatment. For whatever reason—cost, fear or simply apathy—that group of people tends to use emergency dental services only. In the longer term, it will clearly be necessary to tackle the issue of those 20 million people who do not pay regular attention to their oral health. That crucial cultural change will not be achieved quickly or easily. I accept that the concept of phone-and-go centres—in areas where they are working—will probably appeal to people who want to be able to access NHS dentistry quickly and easily on the occasions when they need it, but do not seek continuity of care from an NHS dentist.

A more immediate problem—which many hon. Members will have come across in their postbags and I understand is to be the target of the investing in dentistry programme—concerns the estimated 4 million patients who would like to register with an NHS dentist but are unable to do so. They represent an unmet demand for registration that it is imperative that the system should meet.

There is a significant geographical misdistribution of dentists. As one might expect, problems exist in deprived areas with socio-economic difficulties. However, there are also problems in more affluent areas in which premises and establishment costs are particularly high. That is part of the nub of the matter, and I should like to put some points to the Minister about it later.

The way in which general dental practitioners are remunerated is distinctly different from the way in which general medical practitioners are remunerated. General medical practitioners receive reimbursement for their premises and establishment costs, whereas general dental practitioners receive item of service fees on a national scale across the country, from which they then have to meet the costs of their premises and establishment. That can present grave problems to general dental practitioners who operate in areas where the costs of premises are exceptionally high but are reimbursed only with the same fees that colleagues in lower cost areas of the country receive. I am sure that the Minister is armed with the fact—and will refer to it if I do not—that the investing in dentistry programme has addressed that problem at the margin. Indeed, it has addressed it in my constituency, where at least one new NHS dental practice has been enabled to start up by a grant that has helped it to overcome the high initial capital cost of premises. However, the scheme has been widely condemned as heavily bureaucratic, and its impact has been localised.

The hon. Member for Taunton mentioned the long-awaited strategy for NHS dentistry, which has now been in gestation for 18 months and is presumably under lock and key in Richmond house in a state of partial completion. As a result, this debate is taking place in something of a vacuum. It would be interesting if the Minister were able to enlighten us as to the contents of the document and when we are likely to see it.

I recognise that Health Ministers are regularly embarrassed by the phenomenon of finding that, while they are slaving away in Richmond house over a policy or strategy, some spin doctor in Downing street has managed to wind up the Prime Minister to announce yet another undeliverable pledge. In this case, the pledge was that within two years everyone will be able to see an NHS dentist. To the man in the Dog and Duck, the phrase "see an NHS dentist" would have meant "be able to be registered with an NHS dentist". He would not have thought that the Prime Minister meant "catch a glimpse of an NHS dentist crossing the road". Four million unregistered potential patients want the chance to access, and be registered with, an NHS dentist. However, it now appears that the Prime Minister's pledge should be interpreted in a rather more literal sense—and even that is probably undeliverable. He appears to be offering a drop-in dental service, which, although it may address the urgent needs of the 20 million people who do not seek regular and preventive dental care, will do nothing significant to address the needs of the 4 million who would like to be registered and to engage in proper preventive oral hygiene and dental care.

Thirty phone-and-go centres will not even begin to scratch the surface of the problem on a nationwide basis–that figure represents approximately one centre for every three health authority areas. Two phone-and-go centres are currently running as pilots, one of which, in Shropshire, has already become a phone-and-wait centre. Its capacity is completely filled and patients are unable to gain immediate access to a dentist, which was the whole point of the project.

Jackie Ballard: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one reason why 20 million people do not register is that many people are still afraid of going to the dentist? They hope that nothing will go wrong with their teeth, and put it off. If fewer and fewer people register and go to the dentist regularly, that is likely to perpetuate across the generations. As a parent, I found that, if I took my child with me to the dentist when I had a check-up, she could see that it did not hurt. If the only time one goes to the dentist is to have emergency treatment, it is more likely to hurt, and one's child will be less likely, as he or she grows up, to seek dental treatment voluntarily.

Mr. Hammond: I am sure that the hon. Lady is right. In a moment, I shall ask the Minister about those 20 million people, specifically whether any analysis of their motives for not engaging in the system has been undertaken. I suspect, as Liberal Democrat Members have suggested, that the future lies in closer integration of primary dental care with the general primary health care system. We should try to break down that wall and encourage people to access the system more easily and overcome their fears.

It is estimated that to register the 4 million people who can reasonably be categorised as seeking registration would require an extra 2,000 dentists. Where does the Minister think the dentists required for the Prime Minister's initiatives will come from? I entirely endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Isle of Wight about the trend towards salaried dentists. If that is the Government's intention for the future, they should state it clearly. The obvious source of salaried dentists for the new service is the existing community dental service. People involved in that service are deeply worried that, because it is already overstretched by having to deal with the increasing needs of the elderly and trying to act as a back-stop service provider, it will be denuded by salaried dentists going off to serve in the new phone-and-go centres.

The Prime Minister's announcement represents a sticking plaster solution, which will be a high-cost way of dealing with a relatively small number of patients, but one—no doubt this has been noted—that will create 30 separate photo opportunities for Ministers throughout the country. Likewise, the much vaunted NHS Direct access to dentistry scheme, whereby NHS Direct will provide guidance for patients on where they may access an NHS dentist, is nothing new. It is no more than formalising a service that most health authorities provide already.

I have noted from this morning's comments that others share our belief that there must be greater integration of primary dental services into the primary health care system in the future. Oral health is a helpful part of overall health, and dentists, like pharmacists and, in deference to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), perhaps optometrists, consider that they are left out of the mainstream of the primary health care system. They are left out of the general thrust of the Government's policy in developing primary care groups and primary care trusts. They are not involved in initiatives, such as the NHS net, yet they, too, need access to patients' records to provide proper continuity of care.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight cited the example of a patient with heart disease, when it is essential that dentists are aware of a patient's overall medical history. Dentists have not been involved in discussions on

[Mr. Hammond]

referral patterns although they, too, refer patients to hospital and play a significant role in the primary detection of cancers of the head and neck. Will the Minister say whether dentists are included in the Government's cancer referral pledge that all urgent referrals with suspected cancer will be seen by a specialist in a hospital within two weeks? I asked the British Dental Association that question yesterday. It said that it did not know the answer and had received no guidance from the Department of Health about it.

It is self-evident that there is no chance in the short term of recruiting enough new dentists to solve the problem. Clearly, the solution will lie in incentivising existing NHS dentists to do more NHS work and to be open to new additional NHS patients, some of whom may then go on in the mixed economy to buy private care from them as part of the overall solution to their dental hygiene problems. Has the Minister considered the fee basis? Has he compared the way in which GPs are remunerated with reimbursement of their premises and establishment costs? Has he considered how changes to the general dental practitioners' remuneration system could impact on the current situation by addressing the high costs that general dental practitioners face in some areas?

Does the Minister see a way forward, either by cost-related premiums on fees in specific areas or by separate premises reimbursements? Perhaps such an initiative could include incentives not only to overcome high localised costs, but to attract dentists to what are currently unattractive areas. The contributions of Liberal Democrat MPs from the far south-west have put the thought into my mind this morning that the Government may deal also with the additional costs that are associated with sparsity in rural areas.

What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of existing charges for NHS dentistry on those 20 million people who are not seeking regular dental treatment? Has his Department undertaken any study to see whether the charges that are currently levied are a significant deterrent to those people, or are other factors keeping them away from a continuing relationship with their dentist and a programme of preventive oral care? What cost-benefit analysis has the Department of Trade and Industry carried out in relation to encouraging additional attendance for preventive dental care, given the established interaction between oral hygiene and general health?

Can the Minister say whether patients who visit phone-and-go centres will have access to the full range of options offered by most general dental practitioners, including the choice to have private treatment which is not available on the NHS tariff—for example, non-amalgam fillings? Alternatively, will the phone-and-go centres effectively become the second tier in a two-tier service, with patients offered only the limited NHS menu if they are forced to visit such centres rather than to register with an NHS dentist who is offering a mixed economy practice?

It may surprise some people to know that dentistry is the second largest cause of lost working days in the country. In Glasgow, it is the single largest cause of general anaesthesia being applied. It is not a side show. Clearly, there is a major problem, which can be tackled only by incentivising dentists to do NHS work, to address the real problems of their cost basis in high-cost areas and to integrate dentistry more effectively into the primary care system. That will make them feel part of the mainstream of our health delivery system. The problem will not be solved by soundbites and the creation of photo opportunities for Ministers—although I acknowledge that the Department of Health has some very photogenic Ministers—nor by the Prime Minister raising expectations that cannot be met.

As in so many cases, no one doubts the ability of the Government, and particularly that of the Prime Minister, to spot the opportunity for a soundbite. The Prime Minister leaves a trail of pledges for others to try to meet, as, sadly, we have seen elsewhere in the NHS, often regardless of the cost in terms of disruption to the smooth running of the service and real clinical priorities. I look forward to the Minister's answers this morning to my specific questions and those raised by other hon. Members, and to hearing—in the absence of the promised White Paper on the strategy for NHS dentistry—what the policy is, beyond the soundbites that have already been announced.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): I call Minister Hutton.

10.37 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): That is the first time that I have been referred to as Minister Hutton. However, this is a modernising Parliament and we have a modernising agenda.

I congratulate all hon. Members who have been fortunate enough to take part in the debate, particularly the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard). Whenever NHS dentistry is debated in the House, it is clear that right hon. and hon. Members have strong feelings about its accessibility. They are concerned about the current situation, as are the Government. That is why we have taken the steps to which reference has been made during our debate to try to remedy the situation that we inherited in 1997.

We can analyse the problems, there has been much today with which I do not disagree. However, even more important than that is the need to find solutions to the problem. Of course, it is the Government's job to examine the matter, and I shall be outlining the measures that we have taken so far and those that we intend to take. We all share the responsibility for that. It is easy to criticise, but it would be nice now and again to hear some ideas about solving the situation from Opposition Members. They have been conspicuously missing from today's debate so far.

I again congratulate the hon. Member for Taunton on introducing the debate and on her thoughtful comments. The Government have begun an ambitious programme of modernising the national health service. We have also set challenging targets for improving the health of the population through our White Paper on a public health strategy. We are building a national health service for the future, creating a service that is both fit for the new century and one that will be there when people need it. Although it must always remain true to its founding values, the national health service must—I

am sure that it will—rise to the challenges ahead if it is to meet the growing demands of our population in the next millennium.

The hon. Member for Taunton expressed concern that I would brush her anxieties aside. I shall not do that. I want to expound on some of the actions that the Government are taking and our vision for the future. The Government believe that NHS dentistry plays a key part within our modernisation agenda for the national health service. All those who have ever suffered from simple toothache know how crucial good oral health and good dentistry can be to the quality of their lives. In the past 50 years, the hard work and skill of dentists and other members of the dental profession have served our population well. Needs and demand are changing; so must the provision of NHS dentistry. It needs to adapt and keep pace. I recognise that people are impatient. We need a faster, more convenient health service which is better attuned to the needs of our modern society; and that obviously includes NHS dentistry.

I must make it clear to the Chamber, and I shall not apologise to the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) for doing so, that when the Government took office in 1997, they inherited an NHS dental service that faced some serious problems which were caused by the neglect and the indifference of the previous Administration towards NHS dentistry. The provision of dentistry was, at best, patchy. In parts of the country, there were big gaps between the demand for NHS dentistry and its availability. There were acute problems, and I agree with hon. Members about access to dentistry in the south-west.

Nationally, about a third of health authorities report problems for some of their residents. In recent years, the number of patients registered with NHS dentists had dropped significantly. Patient registration, which was introduced by the previous Government in October 1990 as part of a new pay contract with dentists, peaked in December 1993, when 21.6 million adults were registered. Since then, the number has fallen to 16.8 million—a drop of nearly 5 million.

In September 1996, the previous Government cut the registration period for adults from 24 to 15 months. That meant that people who did not re-visit their dentists in 15 months—previously 24—were taken off the list. That change alone led to a drop of nearly 3 million in the number of registered adults. I was one of them. I came across that new rule when I went back to my dentist in my constituency in Barrow only to find that I had been deregistered. I think that the hon. Member for Taunton said that she or one of her hon. Friends had had that problem, too. The duplicate registrations that can arise when patients change dentists have been weeded out, accounting for another 1 million of the drop. The balance of about 1 million represents people who either deliberately chose not to reregister or who became deregistered because dentists decided not to treat some or all adults on the NHS. It is constructive to consider why that should be.

Before 1990, access to dentistry was informal, with many patients building relationships with an individual dentist over a long period. With a new contract in 1990, relationships between patients and dentist were formalised by a system of registration. Since then, dentists' incomes have been partly based on registrations and, consequently, access to dentistry has depended heavily on registration. Registration was intended to promote continuing care, but it quickly became an end in itself. The previous Government introduced the 1990 contract without fully piloting many of the changes that it contained.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister seems to be generally hostile to the principle of registration. Will he make it clear whether the Government are committed to registration in principle or are hostile to it?

Mr. Hutton: I am trying to explain the drop in the figures that the hon. Gentleman and others have mentioned. I shall come to the new dental strategy in a minute, so I ask the hon. Gentleman to be patient.

As I said, the previous Government introduced a contract in 1990 without piloting many of the changes that it contained. Its intentions were therefore based largely on theory rather than practice, and the consequent results were mixed. In particular, there were significant drawbacks for oral health, NHS dentistry overall and expenditure. The new contract resulted in an overspend of £200 million, which eventually had to be written off. The contract was based on future activity forecasts to guarantee dentists' incomes. They were unsound and resulted in a 7 per cent. fee cut, which led to many dentists increasing their commitment to the private sector—a fact that has been widely commented on this morning. The level of treatment per adult rose while the level of treatment per child fell, and it is difficult to see any clinically based reasons why that should have been so.

The shift towards dentists doing more private work has been slow, but it has been steady. Only a small number of dentists do no NHS work at all, but the amount of time that the rest devote to the NHS has fallen. In a 1993 British Dental Association survey, 75 per cent. of general dental service dentists said that they received 75 per cent. or more of their earnings from the NHS and just 12 per cent. said that they received less than 25 per cent. By 1999, those figures had changed to 58 and 18 per cent. respectively. More than 1 million people now have private dental plans.

Dr. Brand: The Minister said that most dental practitioners still did NHS work. Does he have the facts available to differentiate between NHS work for children and NHS work for adults? My impression is that a large number of NHS dentists have dropped NHS adult work. That is where the difficulty arises.

Mr. Hutton: I am afraid that I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the figure immediately. I will write to him with the requested information because that is an important point.

It is true that availability problems are not spread evenly across the country or our society as a whole. There tend to be fewer access problems for children than for adults, which partly addresses the concerns of the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand). Access is more difficult for charge-paying adults than for those exempted from charges altogether. In many areas, dentists' lists remain open, and anyone who wants NHS treatment can get it. In others, the situation is worse. For example, in the Stockport health authority area, 56 per

[Mr. Hutton]

cent. of the adult population is registered with a dentist, whereas in Bromley the figure is, I am afraid, only 25 per cent. Across England as a whole, the average is 43 per cent.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) asked whether the Department considered that the situation in Somerset was particularly worse than elsewhere in the country. I shall share with him my understanding of the position in Somerset. In the 12 months from September 1998 to September 1999, adult registrations in Somerset declined from just under 183,000 to just over 177,000—about 45 per cent. of the population. Over the same period, child registrations fell slightly from 69 to 68 per cent. of the child population.

Those figures do not exactly correspond to those given by the hon. Member for Taunton. I cannot explain why they differ slightly; perhaps we will explore that matter in correspondence. In general terms, although the figures are clearly low, they compare favourably with the average for England of 45 per cent. for adults—the average in Somerset—and 62 per cent. for children. In fact, the figures for children in Somerset are higher than the national average.

We accept the point that the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome and others have made about the problems of equity of access; of course, that is a fundamental concern which we share with all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate. Even where there are enough NHS dentists to meet demand, the process of finding one can be awkward, time-consuming and off-putting. Today, we have heard accounts confirming that position. The Government are committed to reversing that decline. We want the service to be faster and more convenient for patients—a modern dental service which meets the demands of modern life. Our target, which was announced in September by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), is that, by the end of 2001, everyone who needs NHS dentistry will be able to get it.

We have already taken significant and positive strides forward and improved access to dentistry by using the investing in dentistry initiative and personal dental services. The investing in dentistry initiative spent £10 million expanding NHS dental practices. Across the country, 363 locations benefited from the scheme and 830,000 more patients can register with an NHS dentist. Eight investing in dentistry bids were approved from Somerset, including two from the constituency of the hon. Member for Taunton. Those two grants, totalling more than £30,000, have been approved for two dental practices in her constituency. When the new dentists are approved, which we hope will be done soon, they will deliver treatment to thousands more patients in her constituency. Throughout Somerset, the eight schemes should raise 19,000 new NHS patients. Of that target, 6,000 new registrations have already been achieved. I accept the criticism that Opposition Members made about the situation in Somerset, but we are trying to deal with the problem.

Jackie Ballard: Yes, funding has gone to practices in my constituency but, as the Minister knows, there are difficulties recruiting dentists. I suspect, but I do not know, that dentists feel that Somerset is an affluent area containing quite a few people who can afford to pay for private treatment, that they can make more money in a private than in an NHS practice and that there is no demand for NHS treatment in Somerset.

I return to the Minister's comments on the Prime Minister's promise. He said that everyone would have access to NHS dentistry within two years. Will he define what he believes to be a reasonable distance to travel? I have with me the health authority list that is given to people who are looking for a dentist in Somerset. It gives two addresses in Minehead and one in Shepton Mallet. Interestingly, the other two postal addresses are not in Somerset, which means that the list contains only three addresses in Somerset. How far does he believe someone should have to travel for treatment?

Mr. Hutton: I do not want to avoid answering the hon. Lady's question, but effectively I am being asked to tell the Chamber what is in the new dental strategy. I had the same problem with some of the questions that were asked by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge. Clearly, I am not in a position to discuss the details of that strategy. With great respect, hon. Members will have to be more patient. When we publish the new dental strategy in the new year, the answers to some questions will become more apparent. However, I share the hon. Lady's concerns. If I were in opposition and my constituents were told that they had to travel 30 or 40 miles to see an NHS dentist, I should not be satisfied.

Mr. Hammond: I accept what the Minister says, and I shall wait with bated breath for the strategy document. If my questions are not answered in it, I shall put them to him again. Will he say precisely what he meant when he said that everyone who wants access to NHS dentistry will have it by 2001? Does that mean that everyone who wants to register, and to have an on-going relationship with an NHS dentist and to obtain preventive care, will be guaranteed the ability to do so?

Mr. Hutton: We certainly want to improve access to NHS dentistry. That was made clear by my right hon. Friends at the Labour party conference and on other occasions. I give credit to the hon. Gentleman, who is once again trying to get me to announce what will be in the new dental strategy. With the greatest respect, I am afraid that he will have to wait until it is published.

We accept that the previous arrangements for the provision of dental services were too rigid. Local nuances and the need for such services could not always be met. The personal dental services pilots have successfully overcome some inflexibilities. They were introduced in 1997 to test whether new arrangements could serve as an alternative to the national contract for general dental services. The framework that is contained in the National Health Service Primary Care Act 1997 was used by the pilots.

Dr. Brand: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: With great respect, I shall not give way any further. Time is short and I need to conclude my remarks.

The first wave of 15 personal dental services pilots began in October 1998, and the second wave of 23 pilots began in October 1999. They are concerned with access and seek to guarantee a higher quality of service, but they should have the flexibility to meet the varying needs of different elements in our society. The pilots involved, for example, the provision of services to children, deprived communities and the homeless. Some specialist services, such as sedation, general anaesthetics and restorative dentistry are also part of those innovative schemes.

Proposals for the third wave, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) asked about, are being considered. Access to services for those with special service needs, such as the elderly in residential homes, are included in those expressions of interest. There have been expressions of interest in the third wave of personal dental services from Somerset and from Stoke for the establishment of dental access centres. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North and the hon. Member for Taunton wish those projects well. I hope that they understand that I am not in a position today to say whether those expressions of interest have succeeded. An announcement will be made when a decision is taken.

The personal dental services complement general dental services practices, which remain the key way by which most people get high-quality NHS dentistry. There was some concern that phone-and-go centres would provide only a second-tier service. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge had something of a cheek to refer to a two-tier service, since that was precisely the legacy that his party left behind when it left government.

I confirm that phone-and-go centres will provide all the treatment that is necessary to maintain oral health, including check-ups—they will not merely be emergency clinics. They will plug gaps when there are problems of availability. They will provide a high-quality service that is based around the needs of patients. At those centres, people who cannot register with an NHS dentist but who want to see one can simply ring to make an appointment. They can be confident that they will receive good NHS care.

Those centres are fully consistent with our ambition to provide faster and fairer treatement through the NHS. Schemes will be set up in various locations, including high streets, clinics and in some of the new primary care walk-in centres. Opposition Members emphasised the importance of linking dental practice with primary care, and we accept that. That is why the new phone-and-go centre in Swindon, which will open later this winter, will be co-located with a walk-in primary care centre. That is how we want such services and initiatives to develop.

There will be about 30 dental access centres, which will ease the most acute problems of access across the country. Expressions of interests for the third wave of access to dental access centres are currently under consideration along with the third wave of the personal dental services pilots. We are confident that there is sufficient manpower in the dental profession to staff those centres. The number of dentists continues to rise. The phone-and-go centres and personal dental services offer the opportunity of making the most of all the talents in a dental team.

I have more to say on this matter but, sadly, time is about to run out. I confirm what I said to the hon. Member for Taunton at the outset—that the Government attach great importance to improving access to NHS dentistry, and that the present situation is not acceptable. That is why we have taken action. We are investing in dentistry and improving access, which has had a significant impact. Despite some of the criticisms that have been made this morning, we are developing a new dental strategy for the NHS, which we shall publish in the new year. We have also made clear commitments today and on previous occasions about restoring access to NHS dentistry.

We recognise the importance of good health and value the well-being of our nation. I hope that hon. Members agree that the Government are trying to deal with those concerns, which we take seriously, and that we are putting in place appropriate measures to tackle the problems.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What progress has been made to ensure that the parallel chamber is televised throughout Parliament in our offices? I spoke to my staff five minutes ago and I understand that the arrangements for televising broadcasts from this Chamber to our offices have still not yet been completed. I believe that a feed is available to the press, but that it is not available to staff, researchers or parliamentarians around the Palace. I hope that you can throw some light on the matter.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The light that I can throw will simply reflect the comments that Madam Speaker made in the Chamber yesterday. I am sure that they were widely heard. She said:

"I am taking steps to find out whether we can have that for next week."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1999; Vol. 340, c.159.]

Next week has yet to arrive.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Yesterday, I was slightly confused about the status of the gentleman who sat next to the Deputy Speaker. I tried to establish whether the Modernisation Committee recommended that Officers of the House should not dress as Officers of the House when they are in attendance in Westminster Hall. I believe that this Chamber is not a Committee of the House, but an extension of the House. It is hard to sustain the dignity of the House of Commons in this Chamber if Officers who are working in the Chamber do not dress in a way that maintains the dignity and traditions of the House. Would you give a direction to the Officers of the House that they should treat this Chamber in the same way they treat the House itself, of which this place is an extension?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I remind the hon. Member that the report of the Modernisation Committee that gave rise to the experimental activity in which we are engaged gave no formal approval for the use of the Mace, for prayers or for formal attire. I also remind the hon.

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

Member that, when not in the Chamber but still on duty, Officers of the House do not wear their formal rig. For that reason, no such attire is required here.

Further to that, I must remind the hon. Member that points of order of this sort are an unwarranted intrusion on private Members' debating time. If he seeks to take the matter further, I suggest that he make it part of his report to the Modernisation Committee—everyone is entitled to make a report—which the Committee will consider at the end of the experimental period.

NATO Action (The Balkans)

11.1 am

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I introduce the debate by being unashamedly personal: is there any sign of a Marshall plan for the Balkans? In particular, is there a proposal to do anything about sanctions against Serbia? That country is the engine of economic revival in the Balkans, and sanctions would make things far more difficult. I am not alone in that opinion; it is also the opinion of Mrs. Alison Elliot, who speaks on behalf of the church and nation committee of the Church of Scotland, of which she is a convenor.

Half a century ago, I was 17 or 18 years old. I was "22424588 Trooper Dalyell", Gunner-Driver in the Royal Scots Greys, based in the former SS barracks at Luneburg with the Rhine Army. That involved being in a tank and firing guns either at the Hohne ranges in Belsen or at Lulworth. The smell, the din, the cordite are still with me.

The regiment was commanded by Lt. Col. Duggie Stewart, DSO, who was Britain's gold medallist at the Helsinki Olympics. My squadron commander was Major Aidan Sprot, who was Viscount Willie Whitelaw's brother-in-law. The major published a moving account of the Greys' progress from Alamein to Anzio, Monte Casino, Normandy, the Rhine crossing, and the Elbe. Those experiences were shared by many in the sergeants' mess, some of whom were proud holders of the Military medal.

I say all that because my formative years gave me not a moral superiority but certainly a more cautious attitude to modern war and bombing than those who took the decision—Prime Minister Blair or President Clinton and their Ministers—to unleash missiles. Frankly—it is a hard thing to say—they seem to see war through celluloid images. That may be generational, but it is against that background that I speak with great anger about what has happened.

Stationed with the British Army of the Rhine I was able to visit the flattened cities of Essen, Nuremburg, Osnabruck and Hamburg. Even then, one saw evidence of reconstruction. Rebuilding and the reinstalling of machinery were tangible results of the vision of General George Marshall and his colleagues, who imaginatively embarked on a programme of aid—Marshall aid. I therefore ask my hon. Friend the Minister, the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), whether there is any sign of a Marshall plan for the Balkans? During the conflict, NATO gave the impression that the people of the Balkans were to partake of the prosperity of western Europe. We heard endlessly about the rebuilding of the Balkans. I want to know whether any effort has been made even to start that rebuilding.

During an Adjournment debate three weeks ago and again during the Foreign Affairs debate on the Queen's Speech on Monday, I asked about the 130,000 jobs at the car plant at Zastava that were destroyed. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and I visited Zastava at the end of September, and the destruction that we saw was appalling—acres and acres of twisted machinery. The factory produced 230,000 cars a year and although the Yugo was not the most

popular car, it was at least a source of work. What does such a massive number of unemployed bode for Serbia, which I repeat is the economic engine for the Balkans?

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Unfortunately, the Government seem not to want to give substantial help to Serbia while Milosevic is still in power. That may be a desirable aim, but is it fair to the Serbian people?

Mr. Dalyell: It has been repeatedly emphasised that we have no quarrel with the Serbian people. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax will bear me out: to put it mildly, the trade unions of Zastava were not fans of President Milosevic. There is a real difficulty.

The second question that I asked during those debates concerned an assessment of the long-term effects of pollution that was caused by the recklessly irresponsible targeting of the chemical complex at Pancevo and the oil refinery at Novi Sad. I believe that I am entitled to ask about the Government's response to Pekka Haavisto, the Finn environmentalist who reported for the United Nations environment programme Balkans task force. He asked whether the rules of warfare that resulted in the people of Serbia and Kosovo being faced with life-threatening pollution should be reviewed. Do the Government agree with Haavisto? What is their response to his report?

Thirdly, I asked about the blocking of the Danube. Putting it bluntly, when my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax and I went to the Ministry of Reconstruction in Belgrade, it was made abundantly clear that no effort whatever would be made to unblock the Danube at Novi Sad until the dollars and the deutschmarks were put on the table to pay for the rebuilding of the bridges. I know that the city of Dortmund has made an offer, but what is NATO's general response to that and to the worries of Bulgarians, Romanians and others who are greatly disadvantaged?

My hon. Friend and I had the Bulgarian ambassador to lunch last week, and we found that the situation is extremely serious for those countries. As Misha Glenny pointed out:

"The stability pact is washed up on a distant shore of the European Union bureaucracy . . . Countries like Romania and Bulgaria bent over backwards to assist the West during the bombing campaign and they expect payback, but they're not getting it. If they don't get payback, their rulers will be out. And what you might get in their place, heaven knows. We're not even . . . giving Romania and Bulgaria reasonable access to EU markets.

The Stability Pact was a good signal, but it is not happening. It really isn't moving. And yet you don't get Robin Cook coming on television every day to say the Stability Pact is in danger of being washed up, which it is. Do we hear people saying out loud: 'We're in new danger?' No."

I ask about the stability pact and the power stations because I never believed that those graphite bombs were simply a matter of technical, temporary knockout. If one drops graphite bombs on power stations, one should expect the delicate machinery to be destroyed.

I refer to the article in *The Times* by Simon Jenkins entitled "Robin Cook's wasteland" in which he said:

"Only the lifting of sanctions can save the Balkans from Nato's folly".

There may be two sides to that story, and there ought to be a response as to what we are doing to save the people of the Balkans from the winter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax has been to Kosovo, and I know that the former leader of the Liberal Democrats has often been there. I have repeatedly asked what the military has asked me: is it true that only the Irish Guards provide night patrols? If night patrols are not provided, there will be no chance to stop the ethnic cleansing. The British Army and the NATO forces went to war in order to stop ethnic cleansing, and now it is happening in reverse.

On the World Service at 5.30 on Tuesday morning, as I was driving to Edinburgh airport, I heard Bernard Kouchner—I did not take down his exact words because I was on the motorway. He said that he had been promised 6,000 policemen, but that very few had arrived. There were 60 from the Ulster constabulary, and at most he had 1,400 people.

What kind of provision are we making for the protection of the Serbs? I have asked the Prime Minister

"what discussions he has had with (a) France and (b) Russia on the operations of KFOR designed to protect the remaining Serb populations in Kosovo."

He replied:

"NATO allies and Russia discuss all aspects of KFOR operations on a regular basis and Kosovo was discussed at the Ministerial Anglo/French Summit on 25 November.

Protection of the Kosovo Serbs and other minorities is one of KFOR's top priorities, with around half of KFOR manpower currently involved in minority protection duties. Security for all communities remains our central objective."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1999; Vol. 340, c. 81-82W.]

If that is so, why are there so many press reports about the murders of Serbs? Are they false? I hoped that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West, would be here, because notice was given that I would mention Robert Fisk's report of 20 November about monasteries. It states:

"Last week, I drove down the same road to Prizren and sought out the same church. I found the field and steel gate. But the church was a ruin. A single wall stood. The rest was pulverised stone. Goodbye, then, to the icons and the saints with the staring eyes. Goodbye to Jesus. Goodbye to the Serb Orthodox church. All across Kosovo I found identical scenes, places of worship—sometimes 600 years old—levelled with explosives and hammers, the very identity of Serb history turned to dust amid fields and hillsides by Nato's Kosovo Albanian allies.

The Serb church has issued its own list of destroyed or partly demolished buildings. Between 13 June—when Nato troops entered Kosovo—and 20 October, they say, 74 churches have been turned to dust or burnt or vandalised. The 15th-century monastery of the Holy Trinity above Musutiste, begun in 1465, has been levelled with explosives. The monastery of the Archangel near Vitina, built in the 14th century, has been looted and burnt."

The article goes on at some length. My hon. Friend the Minister has first-class honours in theology and a great knowledge of ecclesiastical history. I am sure that he cares as much as I do, but I am entitled to ask how such a thing can happen when there is massive KFOR expenditure and commitment.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Before my hon. Friend brings us to the general situation in Kosovo, is he aware

[Mrs. Alice Mahon]

that the president of the Jewish community of Pristina, who has recently been driven out of Kosovo by the Kosovo Liberation Army, said:

"Jews and others are driven out of Kosovo, some disappear, some are murdered and their murders attributed to forces beyond NATO's control. Some, like the Serbs and Roma of Orahovac, are imprisoned in a new Warsaw Ghetto?"

Mr. Dalyell: Jews, the Roma and other minorities have suffered dreadfully. My hon. Friend and I were told in Belgrade that the 52,000 Albanians—that was in September and there may have been a change since—had not been molested. Did we go to war for Greater Albania? I do not want to go on too long, and that is a long subject.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): It would be useful to give an example of the challenge faced by KFOR forces in defending Serbian property, people and churches. I have recently come back from a visit to Kosovo with the Select Committee on Defence. The Queen's Dragoon Guards were permanently guarding a church in which the local Albanian population appeared to have no interest, so the permanent guard was ceased and the church was to be put on a patrol pattern. Within three hours of the guards' being taken away, that church was burnt to the ground.

Mr. Dalyell: I would be selfish if I went on for too long, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to discuss his experience with the Committee.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): The hon. Gentleman told us that he was a soldier, so he will know that there is a limit to what armies can do and guard. I saw 30,000 Roma at Podgorica the day before yesterday, and every one was a tragic case. I do not pretend that KFOR is completely flawless, but, rather than concentrating his criticisms on it, he might say, as I did yesterday in Pristina, that the action will never be stopped until the Albanian community and its leaders are prepared to support NATO. The force that can close the shops in Pristina can find the relevant people and stop them. It is a lack of leadership on the part of the Albanian politicians that is the bane of the matter, rather than inefficiencies on the part of limited forces in KFOR.

Mr. Dalyell: I accept that, but I am conscious of the fact that I am probably the last person on the planet to whom the Albanians would listen.

Would the Minister be prepared—I know that it is not his part of the Foreign Office—to make "The Balkans 1807–1999: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers" by Misha Glenny required reading for those who advised him in the Foreign Office? It should also be read by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), who has direct responsibility for the matter.

The end of Glenny's book states that the interventions of 1878, 1914 and 1940

"were so destructive that they guaranteed the Balkans' relative economic backwardness, compared to the rest of Europe. And the violence that these inteventions encouraged, often inflicted by one Balkan people on another, ensured the continuation of profound civil and nationalist strife. In the West, however, these events are rarely regarded as the result of external intervention. On the contrary, the Balkan countries are seen as culprits who force the reluctant outside powers into their unfathomable conflicts. This imagined Balkans—a world where people are motivated not by rational considerations but by a mysterious congenital bloodthirstiness—is always invoked when the great powers seek to deny their responsibility for the economic and political difficulties that the region has suffered as consequence of external interference. 'The Balkans,' Theordore Geshkoff wrote in 1940, 'are usually reported to the outside world only in time of terror and trouble; the rest of the time they are scornfully ignored.'"

Geshkoff is right. The issue becomes all the rage or seems to be forgotten when the British media move on to something else. The book continues:

It is during these long periods of neglect that the Balkan countries have badly needed the engagement of the great powers. Yet the only country to demonstrate a sustained interest in the economic development of the Balkans was Nazi Germany during the 1930s.

The NATO assault on Serbia and Kosovo should be judged above all in this light. Should the West fail to address the effects, not merely of a three month air war in 1999, but of 120 years of miscalculation and indifference since the Congress of Berlin, then there will be little to distinguish NATO's actions from any of its great power predecessors. The NATO campaign can hardly claim either a moral or political victory if its sole achievement is the explusion of Milosévić's Serbia from Kosovo.

There is an unassailable case for political and economic restitution in the Balkans. Yet this is a daunting challenge. The lack of preparedness on the part of NATO was obvious during the air campaign. It was evident after victory, when the Alliance proved incapable of stopping the KLA from imposing a regime of intimidation and murder which provoked the departure of almost the entire Serbian minority population from Kosovo within weeks of the Albanians' return. If the greatest military machine in history is unable to impose law and order in a small province, one cannot help wondering what the future holds for the international community's other, larger Balkan protectorate, Bosnia-Hercegovina; and whether the great powers, above all, the USA, have the political and economic resources to deal with Serbia as it hovers between civil war, economic collapse and conflict with its sister republic, Montenegro. Yet if the great powers fail to seize the present opportunity by investing heavily in the region, the suffering of the Balkans will surely continue for several decades into the new millennium."

The suffering of the Balkans is what this debate is about.

11.22 am

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): I am grateful to be called. I think that this is the first speech that I have made as a Back Bencher. I know that I am confined to 10 minutes—[Hon. Members: "No, you are not."] Am I not? Wonderful. I note—as I have slightly more time—that this Chamber fulfils a dream of mine. I longed for the day when we could speak in a less confrontational, semi-circular Chamber. I thought that that day would never come, but here it is.

I agree with so much of what the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said, but I am bound to say that I disagree with him on the necessity for NATO to take the action that it did. The hon. Gentleman has been to Serbia, but I wonder whether he has ever gone to the refugee camps of the Albanian Kosovars in Kukes and Macedonia; knowing him, he probably has because he is assiduous in these matters. I do not think that he would have found a single person there—I never found one,

even among relatives of those killed by NATO—who did not regard the NATO action as both necessary and right.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): It is not surprising.

Mr. Ashdown: I think that it is surprising. If your uncle or aunt were killed by an army that was bombing your country, you might have some doubts about whether that was the right path to pursue.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. I am afraid that I must ask all hon. Members to desist from this casual across-the-Chamber approach. The hemicycle configuration may well encourage it, but I intend to discourage it. All remarks must be made through the Chair and if hon. Members expect to have an opportunity to engage in the debate, they must wait their turn in the proper manner.

Mr. Ashdown: I take your admonition, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in so far as it applies to me, which I am sure it does.

I also disagree with the hon. Member for Linlithgow about lifting sanctions. I can only tell him that in my recent conversations across the Balkans over the past four or five days, I asked that question of every person I met. The answer is best characterised by someone whom I met yesterday in Kosovo. He has a sister in Serbia, married to a Serb, who is suffering under the sanctions. He said, "I am not sure that the sanctions are right and I am not sure that they are not counter-productive in their present form, but I am sure of one thing: any relaxation now would be used as a propoganda victory for Milosevic. That we do not want, and that my sister does not want." That is the reality.

I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman on the need for a co-ordinated policy towards the Balkans and the tragedy of the lack of it. I believe that if history is generous to us, it could well say that the Balkan wars of the latter decade of this century came before Europe was ready—it had not yet prepared the institutions for dealing with them. We have no such excuse for not stabilising the peace, for which we have made such great sacrifices. I fear that the cost of both the Bosnian war and the Kosovo war will be great in terms of the sacrifices made at the time and I remain unconvinced that the unco-ordinated policies that we follow—although they are successful in some areas—will deliver a stable peace.

It seems that we in Europe and the international community have decided that the best way to deal with the Balkans is to Balkanise our approach to them, which is utterly crazy. Each of the successive conflicts has ended with a further duplication of institutions, overlapping competencies and a further proliferation of useless institutions—like the hon. Gentleman, I suspect that the stability pact is one of them. There are piecemeal policies which, although they are followed with some success in one country, are not interlinked with others. The institutions have, at best, muddled lines of command. Europe has no co-ordinated, central, regional vision about what the Balkans could be, nor is there a focused political will to drive it forward or a central body to enact it. It is a difficult—even intractable—interlocked and complex problem; to deal with any such problem in that way is folly, but to deal in that way with the Balkans, which has seen 1,000 years of conflict, conspiracy and fissiparousness, is manifest stupidity.

I shall say something that people seem reluctant to say. The problem is that we are now losing the peace there. That is not because of inadequate actions in Kosovo, because it is actually going rather well in some instances, or because of the situation in Bosnia or in Montenegro—after my recent visit there I feel rather more optimistic than I might have—but because our actions are not locked together in a regional approach. This is pre-eminently Europe's problem. If the Balkans go bad, we will suffer. The United Nations has neither the structure nor the political will to provide that regional approach. Although this is Europe's problem, the US is putting greater resources into many of these countries than we in Europe are. It is deeply engaged in Montenegro, for example, and providing money, while Europe's only contribution so far to an area that could blow up the Balkans in the next few weeks is 62 pregnant cows.

In this century, there have been four Balkan wars, two in the first two decades and two in the last decade. That is not counting one world war which started in the Balkans and another in which the Balkans were a major battle field. If at the end of the century we do not understand that we have to tackle the problem on a regional basis, we are stark staring mad. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am delighted to hear Conservative Members agreeing with that, because they are not going to agree with what comes next.

There is a reason for that failure. Europe will not face up to the reality of its current position. Let me say something that no one else will say: Europe is developing into a super-power. Can we in Europe continue to be in the ludicrous position of creating a hugely powerful economic entity—perhaps the second most powerful economic entity, if not the most powerful—through the euro, yet have no political responsibility attached to it? That is a free ride which Europe cannot afford any longer. We are creating an economic giant, yet wishing to continue as a political pygmy. We must admit to that. If, as I believe, we are creating a super-power in the world, with that economic strength goes political responsibility and we must behave accordingly. It is in the nature of super-powers that they should be sensitive about their border regions and concerned about their marches. The Balkans are the marches of Europe. That is why they are our problem, yet we seem content to believe that once again Uncle Sam should bail us out in our own backyard. That approach will not work, and the grave danger is that sacrifices made in the war could be lost in the peace.

I hope that Europe will now establish institutions to deal with the region. I am confident that our new European Commissioner, Chris Patten, and Mr. Solana, will bring to the Balkan region the European co-ordination that has so far been lacking.

I shall identify some problems and state the current position. I am more confident than I expected to be about the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The situation is progressing slowly, although we have not reached an irreversible point. On a visit there four or five days ago, I was encouraged by the extent to which we

[Mr. Ashdown]

have progressed. A continued application of resources and patience is needed from Europe; the desire and willingness to take responsibility for their actions is needed from the Bosnian politicians. That has so far been lacking.

In many ways, I was listening to the dialogue of the deaf in Bosnia. The Bosnians were saying that we had to come and do things for them and make them act; we were asking why they did not yet have a fully fledged democracy. That question ignores completely the fact that we are asking Bosnians to create in several years the democratic institutions and free market that we took 300 or 400 years to create. In Kosovo, we are asking the same, except that there we are asking for that to be done in months and following a devastating civil war. The Bosnians wanted us to be the Hapsburgs, but we would not do it; we wanted Bosnia to be Switzerland, but it was not ready to be that. We must have patience to see the job through. However, I am generally optimistic.

In Montenegro, Milosevic has tried by economic destabilisation to do what he did by brutality and ferocity elsewhere in the Balkans. We can support Djukanovic with a relatively small sum—perhaps $10 million. If that sum is provided quickly, we can stabilise Montenegro economically and prevent Milosevic from destabilising it. Milosevic is unlikely to use immediately the 12,000 or 15,000 JNA—Yugoslav national army—troops that he has in Montenegro: he will use other means to seek to destabilise that country. However, if we act now and are prepared to provide the resources to stabilise the dual currency that Djukanovic has established, we have an opportunity to wrest Montenegro from the power of Milosevic without war and without everything that accompanies war.

I am much less optimistic about Kosovo. The Serb violence of which the hon. Member for Linlithgow spoke is now diminishing. There have been no murders in Pristina—save for the terrifying one on the night before last—since the most recent arrival of British troops. That could be because all the Serbs have already been kicked out, but 100,000 Serbs remain in Kosovo. The tragedy concerns the Roma: their houses have been burned while NATO—our army—has been there. I spoke to a Roma woman whose child was born a few days ago on a truck crossing the terrible mountains that separate Kosovo and Montenegro; I crossed those mountains shortly afterwards. It shames me to say that a child had been born in the back of a truck and that that woman was there with 30,000 other refugees. I have seen so many refugees in the Balkans—Serbs driven out by Croats, Croats driven out by Bosnians, Muslims driven out by Serbs. In Kosovo, a further tide of refugees is being driven out under the suzerainty of NATO.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow asked why NATO cannot protect people in that tiny province—if the most powerful army in the world cannot provide peace, what is its purpose? We have the most efficient army in the world, yet have been unable to protect the Catholics in Northern Ireland for 30 years. The hon. Gentleman must realise the limits of military power. The job cannot be done without the support of Kosovar politicians. I suspect that I made myself unpopular in Pristina yesterday by telling people straight that NATO could not stop the atrocity unless they supported NATO.

Mr. Dalyell rose—

Mr. Ashdown: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will allow me to continue briefly.

I told those people that their capacity to achieve the independence that they sought for Kosovo depended on whether they honoured their word to the international community to create a multi-ethnic, tolerant and liberal society capable of taking its place in Europe. I said that their current actions would remove the possiblity of their achieving their dream of an independent Kosovo more surely than anything else that they could do. It is up to them to come forward to assist NATO. I said that yesterday to Hashim Thag: the head of the KLA, and to all the political leaders, including Rugova.

Kosovo stands on the brink. I greatly fear that it could slip back into chaos, despite the best efforts of Bernard Kouchner, who is doing a difficult job with great imagination. He needs all the support that he can get; he does not have the support of the Albanian Kosovar population, and I fear that Kosovo will end up almost where it started.

I give way to the hon. Member for Linlithgow with apologies for the fact that I have taken up so much time.

Mr. Dalyell: There are many shortcomings. However, it cannot be said that we did not understand the limits of military power. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and I pleaded with the Prime Minister both publicly and privately and before bombs were dropped not to take such action precisely because we understood those limits.

Mr. Ashdown: The hon. Gentleman took a sincere and well-meant position; I disagreed with him. He overestimates the current capacity of military power to keep the peace in Kosovo, and to stop the killings that we both deeply regret, without the support of the local population.

We have made great sacrifices. The opinion on the Balkans of the population and, perhaps even more, of our politicians in Europe is: "Been there, done that, got the tee-shirt, won the war. Now we can turn our back on the area." Much patient careful focusing of will, much understanding and much careful and wise positioning is required to push towards peace and stability in a region that has infected the rest of Europe with war for so long. I, and most of that area's people, dream of such an outcome. However, that cannot be achieved without courageous politicians on the ground taking the decisions necessary to support the forces that are there to help them. The task cannot be done without resources or patience either, but, above all, it cannot be done unless we in Europe accept that the Balkans is a region and that it must be dealt with as a region. That is our region, and we must get our act together to ensure that such action is taken.

11.37 am

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): At the onset of the bombing, many of my hon. Friends and I signed an early-day motion that condemned NATO aggression as unlawful and immoral. I wish to consider the unlawfulness of the action. Both the Foreign Secretary and the former Secretary of State for Defence—now the Secretary-General of NATO—told the House on several occasions that they had legal authority for NATO's war against Yugoslavia on the basis that force could be used in extreme circumstances to avert humanitarian disaster. That the bombing acted as a catalyst to humanitarian disaster is now clear. Eminent lawyers are arguing that the military action was illegal.

In a recent pamphlet for the Centre for Policy Studies and in an article for *The Times* on 16 November, Mark Littman QC disputed the lawfulness of the action. Submissions made on behalf of the Yugoslav Government against several NATO countries, including the United Kingdom, were put before the International Court of Justice, alleging that the NATO intervention was unlawful. Mark Littman noted in those publications that the Yugoslav case fell on a technicality. The United Kingdom could have waived the objection and accepted the Yugoslav challenge to have the legality of the bombing tested before the court. The Government chose not to do so. Mark Littman commented:

"Given the weight of opinion and legal authority against the NATO position, the paucity of evidence in its favour and the reluctance of the UK to test its view before the International Court of Justice, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the NATO action was illegal."

I submit that the action undoubtedly was illegal; that bodes ill for the future of international law. However, we do not have time to consider that. My overriding reason for opposing the war was my belief, now justified by what we see happening in Kosovo, that the intervention would make matters far worse.

I wish to consider the lead-up to the war. I was disgracefully smeared during the previous debate on the matter, so I shall repeat this point: wherever a crime against humanity is committed, I fully support measures to bring the perpetrators to justice. There are no exceptions to that. I condemn without reservation the Serb murderers, especially Arkan, who has done so much damage throughout the Balkans. I condemn equally—I ask those who supported the war to join me in this—Brigadier General Agim Ceku, who was the main perpetrator of Operations Storm and Flash in Croatia where thousands of Serbs were massacred or disappeared. I recently visited the mass graves and met some of the 300,000 Serbs who were ethnically cleansed. It is interesting to note that, just before NATO went to war with Yugoslavia, the international court tribunal's report, implicating Ceku and an American general in the war crimes that were committed against the Serbs in the Krajina, was leaked. I shall try to obtain an Adjournment debate on that subject.

We should be even-handed when we talk about war criminals, but such are NATO's double standards in this war against Yugoslavia that, far from comdemning Ceku, it accepts that he is now in charge of the so-called Kosovo Protection Corps, the KLA by another name. That reflects NATO's determination to demonise just one side in the Balkans. The right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) talks about the Albanian leaders, but they were our brave allies. We acted as their air force during this war when we took the side of terrorists and murderers. We should not be surprised if their behaviour has not changed.

Another factor in the run-up to the war was the Rambouillet ultimatum. I was pleased to see Robert Fisk's excellent article in *The Independent* recently, which said:

"In the last days of the Paris peace talks on Yugoslavia last March, something extraordinary happened. The Serb delegation—after agreeing to a political solution in Kosovo—was presented with a military appendix to the treaty which demanded the virtual NATO occupation of all of Yugoslavia."

The Serbs turned down that demand, as would every country in NATO, and NATO went to war. Yet 79 bombing days later, NATO, which had refused to contemplate a change in the military document, lost all interest in the appendix and was content to keep its forces in Kosovo. It did not want to go into the rest of Yugoslavia. The House should debate that in detail because history will show that the Rambouillet accords were an ultimatum, deliberately engineered to start a war.

When I was in Kosovo recently with the parliamentary wing of NATO, we met Mr. Thaqi, the ethnic Albanian leader, the good and brave Mr. Veton Sorroi, who is one of the few hopes for Kosovo, and Mr. Trajkovic, the Kosovan-Serb leader who painted a gloomy picture of what was happening in Kosovo and outlined his fears for the other minorities who live there. Since then, he has been shot in the leg, through the door of his flat. I do not want to criticise soldiers, but, if KFOR cannot protect the leader of the Serbs in Pristina, there is little hope for other ethnic minorities.

Mr. Ashdown: I wonder whether the hon. Lady knows the circumstances of the shooting. Mr. Trajkovic was shot with a .22—one would hardly shoot a rabbit with a .22—through a glass door which deflected the bullet. There is a strong opinion on all sides that that may have been carried out by one of his own people, or even by himself.

Mrs. Mahon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that, but I heard the same argument to support the view that the Serbs blew up their own houses in Pristina. That type of comment is not helpful.

We were told by military and civilian international representatives in Kosovo that they expected the risk and gravity of terrorism for ethnic and criminal motives to increase, and it has. It was clear then, as it is now, that the terrorist organisation—the KLA—was organising, with some success, the murder, kidnapping and ethnic cleansing of all minorities. When a general who briefed us refused to admit the KLA's involvement, I was told to talk to the Irish Guards. As we were staying and sleeping in tents in the camp, I talked to some of the Irish Guards who told me that the KLA was organising those activities. They were clear on that. Since the KFOR occupation, the Roma, Montenegrans, Turks, Bosniaks and Jews have been ethnically cleansed by the KLA.

[Mrs. Mahon]

According to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report on minorities on 3 November, 348 murders have been committed, 116 kidnappings have taken place and more than 1,000 houses have been burnt down. How many times were we told that we were going into the area to stop ethnic cleansing and murder? How many times did we hear Jamie Shea, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence, Lord Robertson, who is now Secretary-General of NATO, say that we wanted the Serbs out, NATO in and the refugees back? What about the refugees now? Are we not worried if they belong to one ethnic group instead of another? The Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence should make statements to the House on the situation in Kosovo. The deafening silence is scandalous.

I mentioned Orahovac, which is a Serb and Roma—and once a Jewish—enclave in Kosovo. It is supposedly under the protection of the Dutch KFOR peacekeepers. I have referred to what the Jewish community leader said about the situation there, but information that I received today from Orahovac is appalling. A Serb woman, Mirjana Jokic, pleaded with a group of reporters only yesterday:

"Get us out now, please. Living in Orahovac is worse than being in a concentration camp."

Describing the situation as catastrophic, members of other ethnic minorities said that there is no electricity, food or heating in the Serb and Roma parts of town. Almost the only way for people to get food is to wait, sometimes for days, for aid that is delivered by international, Serbian and humanitarian organisations. Babies are being born in basements with no electricity or water. A 70-year-old Serb woman, Javana Cusic, said that she has not seen fruit or vegetables for more than a month. Threats by ethnic Albanians have been increasing hour by hour. It must be awful living under those conditions.

Mr. Blunt: It may help the hon. Lady to illustrate the failure of NATO's policy if I point out that, of the 300,000 children who are in education in Kosovo, it is thought that only 1,000—one third of 1 per cent.—are of Serbian extraction, which shows that those people with families have left the area. Only the old people, who are not welcome in Serbia, remain. The future is horribly clear.

Mrs. Mahon: It is only a matter of time before we have an ethnically pure Albania. Albanians such as Veton Sorroi receive death threats if they speak against the terror that is taking place in Kosovo. I agree with the right hon. Member for Yeovil; the Roma are in a worse position than other ethnic groups.

A joint report issued by the OSCE on Wednesday confirmed that there is now a climate of violence and impunity. If attacks by Albanians against the dwindling population and the gypsies continue unabated, more misery will follow. Muslim Slavs in the Prizren area of Kosovo are suffering intimidation and violence because that is how the KLA organises things. We were told when we were there that the organising groups pick on certain groups of people at certain times. The people who guard them have a very difficult task. The tragedy is that we should not have been there in the first place. Had we increased the number of OSCE verifiers and sent 10,000 instead of 2,000—as some of us pleaded with the Government to do—the present misery could have been avoided.

Yesterday, I read in *The Guardian* that a mob of Kosovo Albanians attacked a family of elderly Serbs and killed one of them. On Sunday, the leader of the KLA, the self-proclaimed leader Hashim Thaqi, and the war criminal General Agim Ceku, presided over a rally at which KLA members, wearing uniforms of the now so-called unarmed Kosovo Protection Corps, fired hundreds of rounds from rifles and guns to celebrate their flag day—KFOR simply looked on. It is time that the Government made a statement giving their response to the lawlessness that is in Kosovo.

My final point was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow. Will the Minister explain to hon. Members the current legal basis for sanctions against Yugoslavia? The House of Commons Library told me on 29 October that the reason was that extreme criminality was being carried out by a Government against their people. That was the message, although I may not have quoted the exact words.

The current extreme criminality is perpetrated by the KLA against its own people. What shall we do about that? We need a clear understanding of why sanctions still apply because the original reason for imposing them no longer exists. I have mentioned the article by Mark Littman and I advise hon. Members to read it because it spells out clearly the illegality of NATO's decisions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and I are members of a campaign to build bridges with the people of Yugoslavia. At the end of September, a delegation from the campaign visited Yugoslavia. We found that the lives of the vast majority of ordinary citizens there have been shattered by the bombing of their country. The consequences continue to take an enormous toll on people from all ethnic groups who have little, if any, influence over the terrible circumstances in which they find themselves.

It has been said that we are not enemies of the Serbian people. Serbia is a multicultural country and I wish that more people would go there. My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow under estimated the number of Albanians who live in Belgrade: there are almost 100,000 of them, working in very good positions. There are also 50,000 Montenegrins there—Belgrade is a very mixed community. I visited the camps to which Albanians were driven by the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and I went into Macedonia. My hon. Friend and I also visited the camps outside Belgrade. We visited a Roma camp where people were housed in makeshift conditions in an old school. A visit to refugees is heartbreaking. Some of them have been in the camp for four years, but no one is calling for these Romas or Serbs to return to their homes. NATO has operated a set of double standards.

The civilian infrastructure of the whole of Yugoslavia is devastated. The environment is poisoned. Homes, schools and hospitals have been destroyed and roads and bridges have been ruined. We took masses of photographs, so we have all the evidence. The

destruction of the electricity supply and the water purification systems presents an on-going threat to public health. All in all, NATO's action has been an absolute disaster. I have spoken honestly and earnestly. I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle) is the Minister having to take the flak. This is not his brief and I am sad that he has to be here to listen to what I have said. I know him to be a very good and compassionate man. The sooner the Foreign Secretary comes to the House to make a statement on the chaos that is now Kosovo, the better.

11.54 am

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I shall be extremely brief. I commend this new non-confrontational arrangement of the furniture. I, too, have long wanted it. I hope that it will signal a new kind of politics, with less of the fake aggression and synthetic skirmishing which mark too much of the party battlefield.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) for initiating and introducing the debate, although his perspective and mine are somewhat different. From what I have seen of these wars which began in April 1992, I know that one of their distinguishing features was that civilians not only suffered; they were targeted with particular and peculiar ferocity.

With the NATO bombardment of Kosovo and Serbia, we find ourselves in some sense complicit in the targeting of civilians. I believe that because of the manner in which that air campaign was conducted. The attack on the television station in Belgrade was an attack on an unambiguously civilian target. The attacks on bridges were attacks on civilian targets. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have suffered, and are suffering, not only in Yugoslavia but in countries upstream and downstream of the Danube. What did we do in Kosovo itself? We bombed from 15,000 ft so that our casualties should be zero. I do not wish there to be allied casualties, but if the result is that thousands of civilians are killed on the ground who would not have been killed if the operation had been conducted differently, we must ask ourselves what kind of people we are, and whether we have learnt so very much since the tragedies in Bosnia.

What happened in Bosnia when Srebrenica fell in July 1995 was that obviously we assumed that Dutch lives, especially, but also British, German and French lives, mattered on one scale of values, and Bosnian lives mattered on another. It seems to me that the lesson has not been learnt, because we have done the same thing again.

An example with which you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will be familiar is the incidence of cluster bombs on the soil of Kosovo. Most of the injuries inflicted on casualties in Kosovo every day come not from Serbian and mines or Albanian-laid land mines, but from these engines of death which were dropped by NATO. Many more failed to explode because of the high altitude from which they were dropped—the failure rate might be as high as 20 per cent. There are, on the ground, more than 14,000 cluster bombs with the characteristics of aerially sown land mines. Technically, they are not land mines, but they have the same effect. If we do not consider this matter on a moral level, the Ministry of Defence must seriously question a strategy in which one of its major weapons is just not working and is jeopardising allied soldiers, as the tragic case of the two Gurkhas who were blown up showed.

Mr. Dalyell: How does that lie with the claims of credit from the Secretary-General of NATO, Lord Robertson, in relation to the Montreal convention on land mines? Lord Robertson told us endlessly what an achievement it was to have resolved the problems with that convention.

Mr. Bell: That is an interesting point. We congratulate ourselves on signing a treaty while at the same time we not only fail to clear anti-personnel mines on the ground but, in this case, sow some ourselves by dropping them from the air. We should reproach ourselves for that and our Government should learn from it. There is no point going through these experiences unless we learn from them.

That applies to sanctions. I have spent an enormous amount of the past 10 years in countries affected by sanctions. I cannot remember one—and Kosovo is a classic—in which sanctions have worked; they have also been unproductive or counter-productive. It is a classic case of their benefiting the warlords and racketeers and penalising ordinary people. Arkan was mentioned. I know him: in a singular sense, he counts me as a friend. I can assure hon. Members that he enriched himself as a result of sanctions imposed on Serbia in 1993. We have to be aware of the consequences of our actions.

One other point has not been raised so far. I believe that there is a crisis among the 200 or more non-governmental organisations and aid agencies in Kosovo. The streets of Pristina are crammed with traffic jams involving those white vehicles. I heard yesterday of an Army sergeant who is using combat rations—probably against Queen's regulations—to take food up to a starving family in a distant village because none of the aid agencies and NGOs has been up there.

We have to learn from that. I hope that the Department for International Development will evaluate what is working and what is not. To some extent, the operation has to be militarised. We have the best Army in the world, and it has done magnificently in Kosovo, bringing aid and helping people, but, as the Army withdraws and civilian agencies take over, we find that they are simply not doing so well.

May I reinforce what was said by the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), who has a particular knowledge of these circumstances? He said that it is right to do what we have been doing. Our strategy has been right, but our tactics wrong. We have to hang in there. We must commit ourselves. We must not let these people down. As we end the bloodiest century in recorded human history, we have to realise that throughout the world—and especially in the Balkans—we cannot afford a future like our past.

12 noon

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): I am grateful to be called to speak briefly in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on initiating the debate and starting it off so bravely. I also admire the courage of the hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon). Both hon.

[Mr. Bowen Wells]

Members have spoken without fear against their Government on these matters and both have been criticised unjustifiably. In my hearing, they have been accused of being traitors to their country. I deeply regret such remarks in the House, as they are entirely undeserved.

I want to focus my remarks on the humanitarian effort. After all, one of the main reasons for going to war—we are talking, unambiguously, about war—was to prevent a huge humanitarian disaster. That was the reason given by the Prime Minister to the House of Commons. However, we have had a huge humanitarian disaster and it is continuing. There is a humanitarian disaster in Kosovo, where more than 820,000 refugees now face the severe Balkan winter, in which temperatures are likely to fall to minus 20 degrees. Many older people are incapable of surviving that and will die of hypothermia, as will young children and people in ill health. Hypothermic deaths are likely in large numbers, not just in Kosovo but in Serbia, where there are more than 800,000 refugees or displaced persons.

I want to draw the attention of the House to the traditional meaning of humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid, under which the Red Cross and Red Crescent have operated in war zones, was designed to be totally even-handed. It was not supposed to matter whether someone was a non-combatant or a combatant or for what side he fought: anyone in need was to be provided with food and shelter to survive conditions in war. That is why the Red Cross could operate for both sides during the second world war: it was dangerous, but it was allowed to operate.

We are starting to use humanitarian aid politically, particularly in this part of the world. If we continue to do so, we will exacerbate the hatred and tensions in the Balkans. Far from producing an overall settlement—the war was intended to achieve that—we will sow the seeds, as we are already, for further Balkan wars and atrocities. The 800,000 refugees in Serbia are not being serviced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which should be operating even-handedly in Serbia as well as in Kosovo.

Let us deal with Kosovo first. More than 50 per cent. of houses that are capable of being repaired will remain unrepaired if the necessary materials are not provided for the whole of the coming winter. Those that have been repaired are the result of the provision of those materials, principally by UNHCR operating outside its normal parameters. Of the 50 per cent. that are temporarily repaired for the winter, only one room has been repaired. The rest of the houses will remain unrepaired, which means that the rest of the population—some 400,000 people—will have to be accommodated by friends or relatives in difficult conditions. There will be no food—it will have to be provided by the World Food Programme—and no heating because of the destruction of the power stations. Those people will face a difficult winter, whether in houses that have been temporarily repaired or in those that have not.

What is happening on the other side of the border in Serbia is even worse. Repairs have not been carried out, equipment has not been provided by UNHCR, and Serbia is without heat because of the bombing of power stations. Heat is available only by burning wood. People go out to collect firewood and there is a risk of being blown up by a cluster bomb land mine. There will also be massive environmental destruction as a result of people collecting firewood to keep warm during the winter.

Sanctions against Serbia mean that oil cannot be imported. Heating oil, which is an alternative to electricity for the provision of heat, also cannot be brought in. What are we doing about it? The European Union has organised a large convoy of tankers—I have seen pictures of them—carrying heating oil to be transported across the Serbian borders to the three towns immediately north of Kosovo in Serbia. It is to be supplied to the mayors of those towns for distribution to refugees without heating. It is going only to those three towns because they are headed by mayors who are against Milosevic. If that is not a distortion and a complete undermining of the concept of humanitarian aid, I do not know what is. I do not believe for a minute that that heating oil will be distributed in accordance with the desires of those supplying it. Milosevic is capable of taking it over and distributing it to whomever he likes. That is the nature of sanctions: they give power to the Government to use the supplies entering the country exactly as the Government decide.

Humanitarian aid was never supposed to be about that. It is being used politically and is making a farce of the concept. It will exacerbate the tensions within Serbia between those who have the heating oil and those who do not. That is an entirely unacceptable means of producing a peace settlement, which is what we are supposed to be looking for. The objective of the allies was—however much it is denied—to get rid of Milosevic. They have not done so. They had to negotiate with Milosevic, and they have negotiated the present settlement with him.

We must now move on to the next stage of providing an effective settlement in the Balkans. That will never happen unless humanitarian aid is provided without any prejudice as to its recipients, whether Serb, Roma, Kosovar, Jew or whoever. If people are in need, the humanitarian organisations—to which we are proudly contributing through our Department for International Development budget—must lay the foundations for reconciliation after this terrible war. Bridges must be built and sanctions lifted in order to begin to provide a basis for a settlement in this war-torn area.

12.9 pm

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): Good morning, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. In this chamber, the correct address is Mr. Deputy Speaker. While I am speaking, I note that several hon. Members still wish to speak. If hon. Members keep their speeches brief, they can all have their say.

Mr. Wareing: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am pleased to work in these surroundings for the first time. We are working in humane and civilised conditions, which certainly cannot be said of circumstances in Yugoslavia.

I listened with great interest to the speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) and for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon). They have witnessed the

dreadful conditions in Kosovo and in Yugoslavia more generally. They mentioned the names of people and towns, but I guarantee that there will be no mention in any newspaper, radio broadcast or television programme tomorrow of what they had to say.

Incidentally, how many massacre sites have been discovered and how many bodies recovered? When Serbs were carrying out massacres, not a day passed when we did not see horrible scenes on our television screens and on the front pages of our newspapers. We were told that all that was a result of ethnic cleansing by the Serbs. I am not surprised that we shall not see any of that in tomorrow's newspapers, and I remind hon. Members of a matter that I raised in 1993.

On 2 May 1993, I stood on the edge of a massacre site in Bosanskibrod in north Bosnia, where 38 bodies in different stages of decomposition were already laid out on the ground. I shall never forget the smell, the flies and the general atmosphere in that town. I felt how I imagine British soldiers must have felt when they liberated Belsen concentration camp. Not a word appeared in the press or the media, whom we informed. The present Secretary of State for Scotland was there and was asked by a pressman, "Who are these people?" He replied: "Oh, they are Serbs who have been massacred by Croats." "But we cannot print that," said the pressmen. "Why not?" asked the Secretary of State. "It will only confuse people," was the reply.

Everything had to be seen in black and white. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will confirm that. So I am not surprised at the lack of even-handedness from day one. The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) spoke about the war starting in April 1992. My God, massacres were going on in 1991. Serbs were being driven from their homes in Croatia in 1991. In early 1992, I remember meeting a Serbian man and a Muslim woman who had been driven out of their homes in Rijeka, Croatia, because they were ethnically impure in the eyes of Franjo Tudjman who, in my eyes, is a war criminal. Those people were not allowed to remain in their homes in Croatia.

Hardly a word is ever spoken about that. We sometimes saw the Foreign Secretary twice a week during the Kosovo conflict. However, he does not get up to speak to the House about the circumstances in Kosovo and the plight of people in Serbia which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax said, is a multi-ethnic state. Hungarians form 25 per cent. of the population in Vojvedina and, as far as they are concerned, there is little oppression. I have met them, so I know that that is the position.

There is no doubt that the ultimatum issued at Rambouillet offered the Yugoslavs the choice of submission or destruction. No sovereign state would have submitted in that way. NATO said to Yugoslavia what Hitler said to Czechoslovakia. He told the Czechs, "We are justified in occupying the whole of your country because you are persecuting German minorities."

We must see the bigger picture, not just the Balkans. The Balkans fits into the world strategy of NATO, which is dominated by the United States of America. We must consider our relations with Russia, which played a major part in ending the conflict in Kosovo. Yet Russia was rewarded by the refusal to allow a Russian sector. Had the Russians had a sector, many innocent Serbs who have been murdered by the Kosovo Liberation Army may have been alive today.

We must examine the matter in the context of NATO wanting to enlarge. The real motive for the Rambouillet ultimatum was not to save the population in Kosovo or Serbia, it related to the expansion of NATO. Incidentally, annexe B was not shown to Russia until after the event. Russia ought to be included to a greater extent in the security of Europe. After the second world war, we brought West Germany into the community of western nations, despite its Nazi past. What do we do with Russia at the end of the cold war? We ignore it. I was very pleased when I heard on the radio that Russian troops had arrived in Pristina ahead of everyone else. At least they were making a point and making their mark.

We must examine the Balkans within the broader picture involving our relations with Russia. I want an assurance from the Minister—who, I appreciate, is a compassionate member of my party—that Kosovo is still recognised by the United Kingdom as part of the sovereign republic of Yugoslavia.

12.16 pm

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I—

Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Are these debates not meant for Back Benchers?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: They certainly are.

Mrs. Gillan: I do not claim to have the experiences of other contributors to this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), who has persevered in continual raising this topic. However, I do not need the experiences of other hon. Members to know that there is a serious problem. I reiterate the call from Conservative Members for a full inquiry into Britain's diplomatic and military roles, and the aid that has gone to Kosovo. The Prime Minister displayed arrogance in replying to a question from the hon. Member for Linlithgow in May and another from my right hon. Friend the leader of the Conservative party concerning the request for an inquiry. The Prime Minister dismissed the latter question with one line: "I see no need." However, today's contributions reveal a serious need for a full inquiry and for lessons to be learned.

Conservative Members never had any doubt that it was right for NATO to take action to deal with the atrocities committed by Milosevic. Indeed, we were successful in removing Serbian forces from Kosovo. However, I agree with the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) that the international community seems in danger of losing the peace. Indeed, I would go further and say that we are now in danger of turning a disaster into a catastrophe.

The policy of armed intervention to stop the violation of human rights carries a responsibility to fill the vacuum when the oppressor is forced to leave. That has not happened in Kosovo, and the repercussions can be felt throughout the Balkans and Europe.

Will the Minister respond to Back Benchers' valuable points? Even though the subject is not his direct responsibility, I hope that he will pay attention to

[Mrs. Gillan]

matters raised in our debate, especially those concerning the state of the inhabitants of Kosovo, who are living in damaged houses without heat or light and who are without policing in a lawless society. It is important that we know the Government's attitude towards the chaos in Kosovo, not least for the protection of the population and the 260 non-governmental organisations working in the area.

I shall give the Minister time to reply, and I hope that he will say specifically whether he will join the rest of the House in calling for an inquiry, and what will he do about the dreadful conditions. Winter and peace in Kosovo could prove to be more lethal than bombs and bullets.

12.19 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): We owe a debt of gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) for the persistence and integrity with which he has pursued these matters and presented them to the House. He recently won *The Spectator* Back Bencher of the year award, and all hon. Members would wish to congratulate him sincerely on that. He brings to our deliberations the highest standards of debate, which have been reflected here today.

The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) said that we come from different perspectives and are using a range of perspectives in the analysis of the origins of the conflict and subsequent actions. However, what is shared in this Room is a deep, genuine and serious humanitarian concern for the people and their futures. I was particularly struck when my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow used the seminal phrase about the danger of seeing war through "celluloid images". That was echoed by others, who said that after the crisis and the media images we should not walk away and go on to the next crisis. We should not forget and neglect what has happened. That has not happened in the House precisely because, with respect, most hon. Members who have contributed have direct personal experience over the years of going to the place of conflict, taking notes, listening, discussing and bringing back information. That is a strength in depth in the House. The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) has a track record in aid and development and in asking questions to ensure that aid reaches the people who need it—that view was buried in his questions about whether heating aid was getting through.

I have only a few moments in which to reply and cannot possibly answer all the questions, using the full notes that I have and making comments. However, if any questions are outstanding, I hope that hon. Members will write to my Department. We shall try to respond appropriately and to take the debate on board.

I share with hon. Members the fact that I, too, visited Kosovo. I was the first Minister to go there after the Secretary of State for Defence. I did so precisely because I wanted to take in engineers with expertise in technology and in dealing with power stations and water plants so that they could start rebuilding Kosovo. That was two short weeks after the KFOR troops had moved in. We intervened for humanitarian reasons, and we should not lose sight of that.

I want to say something about how I saw Kosovo and about the work that has been done to repair energy plants. I visited the power station Kosovo B, which is up and running and producing 40 per cent. more electricity than it did before the conflict. If I had more time, I could spell out exactly why that is. Surprisingly, the grid system goes through the whole of Yugoslavia, not simply Kosovo. So, there is more detail that I would like to spell out.

We are not constructing a wider, full plan for the whole of Serbia. The reason for that is that we are not reconciled with Milosevic. Sanctions, as the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) put it, would give Milosevic a propaganda victory, and we agree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) raised pertinent points about Rambouillet and the legal basis, and I shall touch on that in the moments that I have. My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow received a written answer to his question on 26 November. That reply sets out some details, and I simply refer to it for the record. However, at the same time, the UK has not evaded the case brought by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the International Court of Justice. The case was about only interim measures, not the substance—we were not asked about the substance in the first place. The FRY has not yet brought its full case to court and has been asked to do so by January 2000. Then, the allies and NATO, including the UK, will have the time and opportunity to respond, and we shall if the FRY persists with its case. In a sense, the case is still pending at this stage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax referred to Mr. Fisk's article. We disagree with his analysis. The Serbs refused to negotiate seriously on the Rambouillet text. They refused the political agreement, which the Kosovo Albanians accepted. There was no ultimatum to the Serbs at Rambouillet. The Foreign Secretary co-chaired those meetings and he writes in a letter to *The Independent* today that it is

"wrong to say that the Serbs were prepared to agree at the Rambouillet peace talks to a political resolution in Kosovo. At the second round of talks, as well as refusing to discuss implementation, the Serbs sought to reopen large parts of the political text to which they had previously indicated assent. All members of the Contact Group, including Russia, refused to accept this."

I shall not read the full letter, but simply touch on it for the record. There are debates and arguments to be had on that issue, but the case put by Robert Fisk was not clear cut and absolutely accurate.

Of course, reconstruction must focus on the future. What do we do immediately and in the longer term? We need to be clear about what we face. There have been massive displacements among the 2 million Kosovars present at the time of the conflict and people have been murdered. Some 400,000 people were displaced inside Kosovo before the NATO air strikes, and there were 90,000 outside Kosovo. A quarter of all European Union asylum applications in 1998 came from Kosovo Albanians. There was a real crisis, and we should bear that in mind.

What are we doing to rebuild Kosovo? I visited it in June. The estimates of the damage to housing varied greatly, from 10 per cent. to 25 per cent. of the total stock. However, much of the damage was not the result of bombing, and I was surprised at how little bombing

damage there was. The damage was actually the result of fire. The roofs of houses had collapsed because the wooden beams had collapsed. The white wall structures were still standing and the roofs could be repaired. That seemed, in housing terms, to be more of a rehabilitation job than a clear-and-build job. The flats were still standing in Pristina. While I was there, they were empty. Two days later, they were full of people, as 10,000 people a day came back on trucks and tractors. I saw washing hanging out from the flats, as people started to rebuild their lives. The worst areas were the villages, and I saw Pec. However, the roads were intact. I visited the hospital that was mentioned, which was not bombed. The power station to which I referred was not bombed. However, it seemed to have suffered from 30 years of neglect and from a lack of basic care and maintenance on the part of the previous regime. The machinery—there were boilers from Britain—was 60 years old and needed basic repairs. The problem was that there were no staff to run the power station, and the engineers were doing that job.

I want to give just one vignette in the moments that I have left, because it is important. While I was at the power station—most of the work force had gone—an Albanian engineer knocked at the door and asked for his job back. He said, "I worked in this power station 10 years ago, when I was replaced by a Serb from Belgrade."

Mr. Dalyell: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Battle: May I just finish this point? Then, I certainly will give way.

Meanwhile, the Serb who had been doing the job the previous day had gone home and rung in sick because he feared that Albanians would return and that his house would be burnt down as a result. A soldier went and sat in his house while he returned to work. The Serb and the Albanian then worked on getting the power station up and running, and it is up and running now. I offer that as a tiny sign of hope that ethnic conflicts can be diminished and integrated into contexts in which people might work together.

Mr. Dalyell: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's answer, but it is all about Kosovo. My hon. Friend should go to Belgrade and see the destruction that has been caused to the solid old Austro-Hungarian empire buildings. It cost £80 million to put Bishopsgate right, and the damage from an IRA bomb in Manchester amounted to £300 million. For missiles to ruin the centre of a capital city is another matter. What my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and I saw at the Zastava plant and Novi Sad was absolutely horrendous.

Mr. Battle: I take the point. Again, I do not have time to go into what we are doing in Serbia. However, the international community is in place on the ground in Serbia with programmes to meet genuine human need, which will continue through this winter and beyond. However, I should say again that while the regime is still in place, with the corruption and the rest of it, it is not all that easy to get aid through to the places where it is needed. However, non-governmental organisations are already operating in Serbia. The European Community's humanitarian office, to which the UK contributes, has increased its programme in Serbia to 62 million euros this year. The International Committee of the Red Cross has assistance programmes in place. There are soup kitchens to provide hot meals for more than 1,000 people. I checked and found that the winter programme that is being put in place provides clothes, shoes and stoves that will help 300,000 people. Those programmes are happening now.

The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford referred to the difficulties of getting heating oil through. However, it is being blocked at the borders. That suggests that, in other circumstances, a Marshall plan could be put in place, but that there is not an agreement among all the parties to undertake reconstruction. One of the parties is still sitting out on that issue.

Mr. Ashdown: I am grateful to the Minister because he has been generous in the last few seconds. I want to place a few comments on record, because the question was asked whether there would be a real tragedy in Kosovo this winter. In my most recent visits there, every official, expert and Kosovar whom I met believed that, tough though it would be, this winter would be better than last. Then, they could not bring in the harvests and did not have time to mend their roofs. Although I cannot pretend that nobody will suffer, it will be easier this winter than it was last year under the Serbs.

Mr. Battle: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

I want to say a quick word about the Danube. The Danube commission is in place and has been for some time, but it needs agreement. An offer is on the table to clean up the Danube if Milosevic will ask for help and assistance, including financial aid and assistance, to do so. The terms of the Danube commission are there precisely to achieve this.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

Theatre (Education)

12.30 pm

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): I declare a non-financial interest as a member of the board of Gwent theatre in education. The debate will cover not just the future of a few theatre companies, but the future of theatre in education and the benefits that our children derive from that experience.

I was reminded of that some days ago when I received correspondence from Sir Cameron Mackintosh, who stated:

"I feel very strongly that involving children in the performing arts at an early age is vital for two reasons. Firstly, it opens their minds and releases their imaginations to creative possibilities and secondly, it allows children from any background or economic circumstance to show and develop their talents on an equal basis. There is no better way in which children can express their self-worth than through working with other children and being encouraged to show what they can do."

Similar sentiments and recognition of the importance of the work were expressed by Hannah Gething in a letter to a local newspaper, the *Abergavenny Chronicle*, which stated:

"I never realised that education could be so enchanting, inspirational and fun until, at the age of ten years, our class was dragged down to the school hall to watch 'A Midsummer's Night Dream' by William Shakespeare.

A play containing fairies, love, comedy, oppression and class divisions, was softened by Shakespeare's portrayal of magic.

Yet, in my opinion, this magical play would not have captured the intentions of its playwright if it were not for the spectacular performance of Gwent Theatre. Despite being a small company, they create performances that all professional theatre companies would be proud of.

To lose Gwent Theatre would be to lose a valuable and creative part of the community."

The letter continued:

"How many theatre companies would be willing to take in the youth of our town . . . in order to give them a chance to get off the streets and realise talents they were unaware of; talents that could go unrecognised at school?

It is Gwent Theatre who have enabled our young people to attend some of Britain's most successful musical and acting institutions and have prepared other young people for film and television.

Cutting Gwent Theatre's funds is a tragedy but surely not a tragedy where we can simply close the script!"

This debate is our way to ensure that the script is not closed. Indeed, it will not be closed until the drama strategy of the Arts Council of Wales is scrapped.

Only yesterday, the Welsh parliamentary Labour party unanimously called for an inquiry into the matter. It was right to do so, because before becoming the chairperson of the Arts Council of Wales, Sybil Crouch described the drama strategy as a tragedy that will further deprive valley communities outside Cardiff, Milford Haven and Mold, and the consultation process as a mockery. Yet when she became the chairperson, by sheer coincidence, she decided that the strategy was acceptable and proceeded to defend it.

I can forgive a fool, but it is difficult to forgive those who sell their past and everything that has been important to them to further their self-interest and to damn those who are victims of their decisions. Unfortunately, the Minister in the Welsh Assembly who is responsible for the arts seems to be willing to peddle the nonsense provided to him by the Arts Council of Wales. He announced a few days ago that the drama strategy will result in more money, more performances, more actor weeks and larger audiences. That is untrue, and if he did not know that then, I hope that he does now. My hon. Friends the Members for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) and for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) and I issued a statement that we were saddened that that Minister should be part of such a publicity stunt, which gave a totally inaccurate picture of drama in Wales. My hon. Friends and I met the Arts Council of Wales on Monday and were told that theatre in education companies that had made bids for the franchise for the work had

"to be wanted in the area".

I suppose that that is what Hannah Gething was trying to express in her letter to her local newspaper, and we agree with that sentiment—if we did not, we would be treating our communities and their opinions with disdain.

Theatr Iolo's successful bid for the Gwent area had support from London, Cleveland, Warwick and Merthyr, but not one organisation or individual in Gwent was willing to support that bid for the franchise. When we met the Arts Council of Wales, we suggested that, following the publicity surrounding the recent scandal, someone must have written in to support Theatr Iolo's bid, but the council could not name a single organisation in Gwent that had supported it.

Compare that with Gwent theatre, which received support in Gwent from all—I emphasise all—Members of Parliament, Assembly Members, members of the House of Lords, local authorities, 120 schools, 120 voluntary organisations, a petition signed by more than 8,000 people and stars of stage, screen and television, including Victor Spinetti and Caroline Sheen, who played the lead in "Mamma Mia" in the west end a few days ago and who is a product of Gwent young people's theatre. That support is not confined to the people of Gwent. Outside Gwent, 125 Labour Members of Parliament and dozens of Welsh Assembly Members showed their support.

Gwent theatre is "wanted in the area" because it started theatre in education in that country 20 years ago. It built up a company and a service that is one of the finest in the United Kingdom. The Arts Council of Wales told us that the successful applicant had

"to be wanted in the area",

but it is ignoring its own rules, the support for Gwent theatre and the total absence of local support for Theatr Iola.

The Arts Council of Wales is telling people in my valley and other valleys in Gwent that they are not clever people, but idiots, so it cannot allow them to determine the direction of theatre in education or the company that should represent them. The Arts Council of Wales, in its plush offices in the capital city of Wales, is making decisions for those people. Its argument is that not only are people in Gwent incapable of determining the direction that theatre in education should follow, but none of the hundreds of thousands of people in Gwent has the skill, talent or creativity to direct a theatre in education company. The Arts Council of Wales decided to overcome the problem by asking a Cardiff-based company to go and to educate the people of the valleys.

People from the valleys are not idiots. They are capable of making such decisions, as they were capable of creating the history and a community spirit of which we are proud. The first production by Gwent theatre, which I was with 23 years ago, reminded us of that history. It taught us that the history of our community is not a history of kings, queens and generals, but a history of working people, miners, steel workers and women who worked in factories and at home. That is the history of my village and of our parents. Gwent theatre consistently reminds us to be proud of that history and those communities and never to apologise for them. It can do that because it has been a part of those communities and that history, which it has helped to create.

We wanted to have a rational debate with the Arts Council on the franchise for theatre in education, so we requested certain information. We asked to see Theatr Iola's bids. We asked for the minutes of the discussions in which the decisions were taken, for the minutes of the discussions on Theatr Iola's business plan, for the details of the organisation that supports Theatr Iola and for copies of the individual marks on the 13 criteria that the evaluation panel awarded to each franchise, but all those requests, and more, were refused.

I can only assume that there is something to hide, but what? We are talking about a charitable body—a small theatre company—not about an arms manufacturer selling dodgy weapons to even dodgier foreign powers, so what is there to hide? Why should these requests be refused? Companies such as Gwent theatre and Theatre Powys have made their bids public.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): The value of theatre in education, as the hon. Gentleman has said, is immeasurable to young people; it gives them poise, confidence and the ability to make progress in society and to carve out a career. In rural east Wales, companies such as Theatre Powys will not be able to continue as a result of the strategy of the Arts Council of Wales. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that there should be a major inquiry and a reversal of that strategy, which is destroying community-based theatre in Wales?

Mr. Smith: I agree totally with the hon. Gentleman, but that inquiry would be worthless unless we have access to the information that he and I, and many others, have demanded. However, being optimistic, I always believe that it is impossible to keep a secret. Information is leaking out. Although Theatr Iola refused me access to information on the bid, it provided me with other information. I discovered, for example, that its business plan did not mention where in Gwent the company would be sited, or the costs of setting up such a company in a different county. I do not understand how the Arts Council could have accepted the business plan without that information, especially as Gwent theatre's building, which has been refurbished in the past few years, is now worth about £500,000. If Theatr Iola wants to go to Gwent, it will need a similar base. Surely the cost of that base should have been included in the business plan.

Theatr Iola informed me that the funding for its base could come from the money in its bank account and from any other successful bids for funds that it may make in future. Obviously, future grants will not help to solve its immediate problem of setting up a base in Gwent by April 2000. I contacted Companies House in Cardiff to check how much money Theatr Iola had in the bank in April 1999. It was £25,000 in credit. If it used every penny of that money. It could not purchase a dilapidated building in the most deprived part of our community.

Mr. Livesey: Does the hon. Gentleman realise that Powys county council has earmarked £145,000 to support Theatre Powys this year, but it is not prepared to match that sum for an outside company? That puts in focus the inadequacy of its financial plans.

Mr. Smith: The position is similar in Gwent. When we asked the Arts Council why it did not check that financial backing was not available to Theatr Iola, it informed us that it could not be certain about such matters. We were staggered by that remark, because that is the one thing that should certainly be demanded in determining a business plan. Where will the base be? What will it cost? How will the money be raised? Those are a few of the questions that must be answered. When I asked the director of Theatr Iola where its base in Gwent would be, he admitted that he did not know, saying, "Look here, we would not want the base to be more than 25 miles away. If it was more than 25 miles away, we would have to pay the additional expenses demanded by Equity." So we can forget about Theatr Iola being based in the northern part of my community—the most deprived part—because those additional expenses are more important than anything else.

When we raised such issues with the Arts Council, we were shocked to be told that the money could come from the £125,000 franchise. If Theatr Iola used all that money, it could have a base similar to that of Gwent theatre. Every penny of that money that it uses is a penny less for the services that were awarded the franchise. We asked how many members of the evaluation panel, whose responsibility it was to decide which bidders would be successful, had allocated points when judging the individual companies that applied for the franchise, but the Arts Council refused to give us that information. It also refused to deny that Theatr Iola was allocated points for criteria on which it should have been impossible for it to receive points. For example, a company cannot be given points for receiving local authority support if it receives no such support. It cannot receive points for having a base, if it has no such base. It would be as though I had awarded top marks to someone who had not even bothered to sit an examination.

It is scandalous that only half the evaluation panel that took the decision had witnessed a performance by Gwent theatre. How can a company's artistic ability be judged without seeing one of its performances? The Arts Council would not tell us of the scores allocated to each company. It did not explain the allocation, nor did it convince us that nothing underhand had taken place in awarding the franchises.

This debate is part of a campaign to rectify that wrong. We hope that the Welsh Assembly, as one of the bodies responsible for Arts Council moneys, will insist on an inquiry, as did the parliamentary Labour party yesterday evening. During the elections to the Welsh Assembly, nearly all the parties told us that they would

[Mr. Smith]

make a bonfire of the quangos; they would end the quango state in Wales. Unfortunately, that has not happened, but they could begin to rectify that wrong by putting pressure on the Arts Council to change its decision. The Arts Council is as much a quango as any other. The campaign will continue until the injustices have been rectified, and the Arts Council must realise that it is as simple as that.

12.48 pm

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) for securing this debate, for his vigorous support of the campaign and for his work as a member of the board. I also thank the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) for his contribution to the public meeting on the issue. The same points can be made about Theatre Gwent as about Theatre Powys.

The headquarters of Theatre Gwent is in my constituency at Abergavenny. I have been associated with the company all the time that I have been a Member of Parliament. I have seen performances in village halls, in the middle of Monmouth during the festival and in schools recently.

The decision taken by the Arts Council of Wales not to award Gwent theatre the contract to provide theatre in education of Gwent is mistaken and perverse; it will have catastrophic consequences for a theatre company that has gained a reputation for excellence. That is a serious problem.

I am not qualified to comment on artistic matters, but I can comment on public accountability. How can a publicly funded Welsh body allocate £125,000 without making available its business plan? I ask the Minister to request that the companies' business plans be deposited in the Library.

How can Theatre Iola show evidence of support from local authorities, which was a key criterion, when it did not seek any such support? According to the criterion, each applicant must supply evidence of planned or obtained local authority financial support. To our knowledge, none of the local authorities in this area gave any support. They were not asked to do so, even though a key criterion is to provide education through education authorities, which are funded by local authorities. In response, Blaenau Gwent county council said:

"The whole procedure has been deeply flawed and none of the stakeholders, the funding partners, have been involved in the allocation of the new franchises."

Monmouthshire county council said:

"All members of the Council have unanimously condemned the decision of the Arts Council and asked all authorities in Wales to hold them accountable for recent decisions."

The third point that I wish to make is on the assessment of artistic ability of the two companies—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. The hon. Gentleman is entitled to speak because the Minister and his hon. Friend have given him permission. However, the debate is intended to be between the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and the Minister, and the hon. Gentleman is now eating into the Minister's time.

Mr. Edwards: I shall just finish my last sentence, having sought permission to contribute from the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent. How can the panel assess the artistic ability of either company if it has not gone to the schools? I have been to the schools—I asked permission to do so. It is incredible that a decision can be made on the performance of a company in a school without the evaluation board going to the school. That raises serious issues about public accountability and the accountability of the Arts Council of Wales, and I hope that there will be an investigation.

12.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I am pleased to take part in a debate on this subject, in which there is great interest. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) secured the debate, but I am also glad that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friends the Members for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) and for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards), the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) and others are present and taking an interest in this important matter.

I recognise that the issues that were raised today are of a serious nature. They were well presented, with passion, by my hon. Friends. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent will be aware, the Arts Council of Wales is the responsibility of the National Assembly. Nevertheless, arts policy is important to the UK Government, and I fully recognise the concerns raised by my hon. Friend in defending his constituency interests.

I should briefly outline the context of arts funding in Wales. As hon. Members will be aware, the Assembly has the power, under section 32 of the Government of Wales Act 1998, to do anything that it considers appropriate to support the arts in Wales. The Arts Council of Wales is an Assembly-sponsored public body set up by royal charter. The relationship between the Assembly and the Arts Council is governed by the council's management statement, which makes it clear that it is for the council to allocate resources, and for the Assembly to satisfy itself as to the proper conduct in fulfilling that role. Tom Middlehurst, who is responsible for post-16 education, retains direct political control of the Arts Council of Wales and of the areas mentioned. Given the seriousness of the points made today, I am taking an interest in such matters, as is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Clearly, my hon. Friends who have spoken today are unhappy about the Arts Council's decisions on who will obtain funding under the new theatre for young people scheme, and about the process by which such decisions have been made. The scheme has replaced the school-based theatre in education scheme, which was previously run by the Arts Council. Under the new scheme, funding to provide theatre and educational experiences will be limited to five theatre organisations, which is a reduction on the eight companies that currently receive funding. My hon. Friends have mentioned Theatre Gwent, Theatre Powys and Clwyd Theatre Cymru in north Wales, all of whose bids were unsuccessful. At this point, I should declare an interest: my wife, Councillor Margaret Hanson, is the chair of the Clwyd Theatre Cymru board, but she receives no remuneration for that post.

I am aware that early-day motion 980, which calls for a review of the proposed scheme, has been signed by well over 100 colleagues. I am also keenly aware that there have been meetings in the House of Commons between hon. Members and the Arts Council, between the First Secretary and hon. Members and between my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and hon. Members. Deep concern has been expressed about the impact of the decisions on the theatres that have been mentioned.

In preparing for this debate, I read with great interest the detailed press reports, from all parts of Wales, of further representations. Among those making representations were Victor Spinetti and the Guild of Writers and Musicians, who live and breathe the theatres involved, and recognise the great contribution that they have made to the community in Wales. I must not ignore the local authorities, which are integral to the success of theatres in north, mid and south-east Wales, and which have also expressed concern.

I intend to ensure that the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent, and by the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, are put to the Assembly and the Arts Council.

Mr. Edwards: Will my hon. Friend give an assurance that he will request that the bids of Theatre Gwent and Theatr Iolo are deposited in the Library of the House and, possibly, in the Welsh Assembly library?

Mr. Hanson: I shall put the request to the Arts Council and the responsible Assembly Secretary.

As I have mentioned, I have no direct responsibility for the Arts Council in Wales. However, I believe strongly in openness and transparency in decisions made by public bodies; I always have and I always will. Openness and transparency were central to the devolution settlement that was agreed: making decisions more open and accountable, and making them closer to the people affected. I was not party to the process by which decisions were made by the Arts Council in relation to the scheme. However, in the interests of openness, I shall write to the Assembly Secretary, Tom Middlehurst, and to the chief executive of the Arts Council, to pass on the concerns of hon. Members who have spoken today. I shall ask them to reply to me at the Welsh Office about those concerns. I shall also request the information for which my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth asked, and I shall consider the possibility of placing those items in the Library.

Devolution is about partnership. Just as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State listened to the Assembly's thoughts on the Queen's Speech, I hope that the Assembly will listen to the concerns expressed in this House today, in the spirit of co-operation and openness that we are seeking to engender in the partnership process. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent will be aware that the theatres concerned can appeal should they so wish. An independent assessor would sit on any appeal panel.

Mr. Llew Smith: May I inform the Minister that that is a misuse of the English language? The Arts Council took the decision that Theatre Gwent should not have that franchise, and the Arts Council will decide whether that franchise should be restored. As I understand the meaning of the word, that is not independence.

Mr. Hanson: I shall look into that. Whatever the merits or otherwise of the appeal process, it is in place. I have seen correspondence that my hon. Friend has had with the Assembly Secretary, and he may be able to refer the matter to the Welsh administration ombudsman, if there is evidence of any inappropriate action. I have heard his request for a full inquiry into the matter, and I shall ask the Assembly to treat it with the gravity that it deserves.

The Government believe in theatre and education in the UK context. It is one of the main strands of our arts policy proposals. Education and theatre provide a great opportunity to expand people's potential, involve them in our communities, and make Britain a centre for world excellence in arts and culture. Our three aims are building excellence in the arts, allowing greater access and allowing education to develop a love of the arts and a skill base for future economic development.

I support the call for openness. I shall write to the Assembly Secretary and the Arts Council, and I shall consider the question of the appeals panel, which my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent mentioned. I shall also ensure that the Assembly addresses his concerns. It is important, in a spirit of partnership, openness and sharing, that differing views are understood, and that the future of the arts in Gwent, Powys and north Wales is considered. I cannot comment on propriety, but I shall ensure that those matters are dealt with.

Chief Engineering Adviser (Cabinet Office)

1 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): It is a great pleasure to speak in this Chamber, although I note that there is considerable lack of room in the public areas.

Given that I am speaking in a new Chamber, I shall begin by giving a bit of a history lesson. The 19th century was a golden age for many, although by no means all, in Britain. Our empire spanned the globe, and British warships ruled the waves, preserving a Pax Britannica. It was also a golden age of engineering, and the two ages are connected. Names such as Brunel, Stevenson and Faraday were prominent in the public eye. Those great Victorian engineers were feted by society, and enjoyed something like celebrity status, largely because they were pioneers whose achievements represented a quantum leap in the development of human civilisation.

Improving or developing an existing invention never quite captures the public imagination in the same way, even if, in doing so, its original impact is expanded a millionfold. That, to a large extent, has been the unenviable lot of the 20th-century engineer. He has developed and refined the engineering discoveries of his 19th-century ancestors, and, as a consequence, has been rather taken for granted.

Of course, the advances made by engineers during the past 100 years—the jet engine, mains electricity, the computer, clean hot and cold running water, television, life-saving medical equipment, the motor car, and the telecommunications revolution, including the information super-highway—have had an incalculable and unparalleled impact. Those developments have shaped the ways in which we live, and to which the 20th century can lay claim, yet the contribution of the 20th-century engineer has never been properly recognised.

If ever a moment crystallised the boundless possibilities of human ingenuity and spirit, it was Neil Armstrong's giant leap for mankind—one of the century's, if not the millennium's, indisputable triumphs. It was also an engineering triumph, as was its transmission live on television into our own homes. The media may erroneously refer ad nauseam to rocket science and NASA scientists, but the scientific principles that underpinned Apollo 11's success were not new and, in themselves, could never have propelled man to the moon.

What actually made possible the outstanding achievement of the century was the insatiable capacity of engineers to solve any problem, however daunting it initially appeared. Essentially, the first moon landing was made possible by the application of new materials, allied to innovative mechanical and electronic systems. They are inescapably the preserve of the engineer, rather than the scientist. The fanciful thought of putting a man on the moon fascinated, but eluded, man since the dawn of civilisation. It fell to 20th-century engineers, however, to turn that impossible dream into reality, and shatter for ever any imagined boundaries to human endeavour.

Similarly, I believe that the problems and challenges that the world faces in the 21st century will be largely the preserve of the engineer, rather than the scientist. As the world population continues to rise and the third world continues to develop, a time bomb is ticking with regard to the adequate provision of food, energy and shelter. Sustainable development will be the new millennium's holy grail, and engineers, who may be the only people equipped to find it, are already searching. As this century nears its end, the engineering profession is producing visionary solutions to the challenges that the world faces in the next, in key areas such as transport, energy, telecommunications and the environment. Those are the fronts on which the sustainable development battles of the 21st century will be fought. The good news is that engineers are already mobilising.

Engineers have always been the world's problem solvers, as the history of the last millennium verifies. Until quite recently, their contribution to the development of civilisation was recognised and society regarded them highly. For a variety of reasons, that is no longer the case. During the past 100 years, their status—but not their contribution or their quality—has diminished significantly.

Engineers have indisputably shaped the past, and will undoubtedly shape the future, but they are also shaping the present. Projects designed and built by engineers include the fabulous millennium wheel, known as the London Eye, which stands across the river from the House, and is sponsored by British Airways; the millennium dome, which is controversial in the eyes of many, but a superb technical feat in the eyes of everyone; the channel tunnel; and Portcullis house, which stands opposite this very Chamber, and involved ground-breaking construction methods, including prefabrication techniques that are being copied abroad. They are breathtaking examples of engineering, and remind us that engineering's contribution to the development of civilisation continues apace.

Of course, great engineering is not only, or even primarily, about aesthetics and landmark projects: it is about improving the quality of everyday life. Engineering is also about wealth creation and the nation's well-being. It underpins the entire UK economy and determines our competitiveness on the international stage. The Government claim repeatedly, and publicly, that engineering contributes just 8 per cent. to UK gross domestic product, but their standard industry classification codes reflect an obsolete, out-of-date, flawed definition which encompasses only the heavy, metal-basing end of the engineering spectrum. They have erroneously consigned engineering to a heavy manufacturing ghetto that is in serious decline in all the G7 developed nations.

The Government's ignorance is damaging the industry and the profession alike. What about construction, telecommunications, aerospace, utilities and the process industries? Surely no one, except perhaps the Government, would dispute that all those industrial sectors also constitute engineering sectors. Certainly, the companies that operate in those sectors would not dispute that fact. Many of them have shown their engineering credentials by becoming corporate members of representative bodies such as the Engineering Council. Why would they affiliate themselves to such bodies if they did not consider themselves engineering companies?

If the Government took account of all engineering-led

industries, the calculation of engineering's true contribution to GDP would rocket to more than 40 per cent. If sectors such as financial services and retail, which could not function without engineers, were also taken into account, the figure would probably be nearer to 80 per cent.

In 1998, engineering employed about 1.8 million people and accounted for some 80 per cent. of all UK exports, which were valued at £142 billion. Those statistics demand that the Government should afford engineering far greater attention. They should listen far more closely to what the country's engineers have to say on matters of major national importance.

Following the recent rail tragedy at Ladbroke Grove, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions invited Sir David Davies, who is one of the country's most eminent engineers and president of the Royal Academy of Engineering, to conduct a personal investigation into the effective operation of train protection systems. That was a sensible course of action: no one is better qualified than Sir David to conduct such an investigation. How much more sensible would it have been to consult him and other, similarly qualified engineers about rail transport policy before the accident?

The technological boundaries of the Government's much vaunted, knowledge-based economy are rapidly changing. As we move inexorably towards such an economy, so the boundaries of engineering are changing in parallel, and engineering is set to become yet more central to civilisation's development and our nation's well-being. More solutions to the global challenges that confront our nation will be found by engineers than by any other group. I believe that engineering will become more important than ever before. In the distant future, it may prove vital to the preservation of life itself.

What of the present day? The influence and impact of engineers on society extend far beyond engineering. Business, commerce and the whole of industry, not just manufacturing, are largely led by engineers. They are led not by accountants, as many people assume, or by corporate lawyers, as some may think, but by engineers. At the last count, 17 of the FTSE top 100 companies were run by engineers, compared with only 15 by accountants. In total, qualified engineers hold about 160 of the total number of directorships of FTSE companies.

Engineers also dominate the academic world, with the latest count showing 18 out the 106 institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom to have engineer vice-chancellors or principals—more than from any other discipline. It is vital to the future success of the country that the Government listen to the nation's professional engineers and, if the nation is to prosper, that they receive and understand sound and timely advice on engineering matters.

We now come to the crux of the debate. At present, the principal source of advice to the Government on all engineering-related issues is the chief scientific adviser to the Cabinet, Sir Robert May, one of the most eminent figures in the scientific world. Engineering forms part of Sir Robert's brief, because the Government see engineering as no more than a branch of science, a subset on a Venn diagram.

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government's persistence in not employing an engineering adviser to the Cabinet sends an unfortunate message to the 2 million or so engineers in the United Kingdom, which is that their status and their contribution to the quality of our lives are not acknowledged or understood at the highest level of government?

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Lady has hit the nail on the head. By every measure, engineers enjoy—if that is the word—a lower status in the United Kingdom than in France, Germany, the United States of America or Japan. The Government's continued refusal to accept that engineering is wealth-creating, and different from science, helps to perpetuate the myth that engineers are of a lower status. That is a dangerous and ignorant over-simplification of reality.

Science is the business of discovering about nature and its laws, of finding out what is already there. If one scientist does not find something, there is every probability that, in due course—I am always an optimist—another one will, because scientists are investigating the existing universe and its components. Engineering, however, is about applying the findings of science to create something that has never existed before. Engineers and engineering provide the nation's creativity, innovation and competitiveness, and their views on major issues are not necessarily the same as those of the scientific community.

That is not merely a question of semantics. The distinctions between science and engineering demand that the Government look on them as related but distinct, and treat them differently. It should not be assumed that the interests of engineering and engineers are the same as those of science and scientists. Special measures need to be applied. Nor should it be assumed that a scientist thinks in the same way as an engineer, or vice versa. Scientists are theoretical; engineers are practical and entrepreneurial. It is unlikely, therefore, that one individual could ever represent both groups to everyone's satisfaction.

Science is a net consumer of the national wealth, while engineering is a creator of it, and the key enabler in exploiting the science base and in turning scientific discoveries into practical solutions. That must be recognised in its own right, as it is in other countries. Only the ignorance of politicians in the United Kingdom ensures that it is not. The time is overdue for the Prime Minister to appoint a chief engineering adviser to the Cabinet to mirror the very different role of the chief scientific adviser.

On the previous occasions that the engineering community has questioned the logic of the present strange situation, it has received little encouragement. I have tabled parliamentary questions on the issue, as has the hon. Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas), who is also one of only seven chartered engineers in the House. One of the reasons routinely given by the Government for their refusal to consider the proposal is that to give engineering its own representative would be unfair to other specialist disciplines such as medicine or the social sciences, both of which also form part of Sir Robert May's brief. The Government ask why engineering, but no other specialist discipline, should be singled out for special attention. That argument is weak and unacceptable. It damages the wealth-creating capability of the nation and the well-being of our people.

[Mr. Fabricant]

It is not an argument given in France, Germany, Japan or the United States. It is given only in the United Kingdom.

The call for an adviser on engineering should not be seen as a personal attack on Sir Robert May or on his performance as chief scientific adviser. He is an eminent figure in his own right—he even had some training in chemical engineering in his formative years—but essentially he is a natural scientist.

The engineering community has other channels of communication with the Government, as I am sure the Minister will point out, as well as other opportunities to make its voice heard during the policy-making process. It can, and does, respond to Government consultation exercises and submit evidence to Select Committees. It lobbies in the usual way. In all this, its voice is heard no more clearly, or given any greater weight, than the myriad other pressure groups fighting for the Government's ear. That is extremely old-fashioned. It is neither cool Britannia, nor good government.

Evidence of the Government's muddle on the issue was demonstrated last week, when my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) tabled a question on ministerial responsibility for engineering in the Minister's own Department. He received a wholly incorrect answer which even failed to mention the engineering responsibilities of Lord Sainsbury. This muddle is unforgivable.

As Minister for Science, Lord Sainsbury has recently agreed to a regular six-monthly meeting with the chairman of the Engineering Council, Dr. Robert Hawley, to discuss issues of interest to the engineering profession. I welcome that. The Department of Trade and Industry is collaborating with the Engineering Council to develop a closer relationship with it, and with the profession generally, which I also welcome. Those are undoubtedly moves in the right direction, but they are insufficient when compared with the practices of other nations in which engineering is close to the heart of government.

A great responsibility for the future health and wealth of the nation rests on the shoulders of the country's 280,000 registered professional engineers, and on the additional 1.5 million people employed in engineering. Appointing an engineering adviser to the Cabinet would follow the practice of other developed nations and would demonstrate clearly that the occasional public proclamations made by the Government about the importance of engineering are not merely hollow words. It would send a clear message to the rest of the country that the Government consider engineering important, and it would greatly help the engineering community in its efforts to maintain a world-class engineering work force, thereby sustaining the UK's global competitiveness. It might even ensure that scientific discoveries made in this country are translated into engineering products and sold by British manufacturers, rather than having Japanese and American firms pinch British ideas from British scientists and make money out of them, as happens at present.

The engineering companies on which this country depends are suffering damaging skills shortages because of their inability to recruit top-quality young people into engineering. Bright young people take engineering at society's valuation, and if engineering is looked down on by society, we should not be surprised that young people choose not to enter the profession—a point admirably made by my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby, as I think I am allowed to call her in this Chamber.

Is the Minister aware that only 43 per cent. of students taking up engineering degrees in 1997 had the equivalent of two grade As or better at A-level, compared with 99 per cent. for medicine and 56 per cent. for law? That is stark, statistical proof—if it were needed—that engineering is not seen as a preferred or attractive career option for the most able school leavers. Yet engineering is so critical to the success of our country that it needs to be attracting the very best available talent.

The time for platitudes is over. The Government will not be thanked by the engineering industry or its professionals for mouthing sweet nothings, no matter how attractive they may be. The time is long overdue for the appointment of a chief engineering adviser if the long-term future of our economy is to be assured. After the customary praising of engineers and engineering, I hope that the Minister will say that at long last such an adviser will be appointed, for the benefit of engineers and the nation's economy. Frankly, nothing less will do.

1.21 pm

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity so early in the Session to respond to a debate in this new Chamber. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) on securing the debate, and on the passion and deep knowledge with which he introduced the subject. I confess that prior to my preparations for the debate I was not aware that the hon. Gentleman is a chartered engineer. However, I have been able to discuss the issues with my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas).

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Lichfield for giving me another opportunity to place on the record the enormous importance that the Government attach to engineering. We have a deep understanding and appreciation of the extraordinary contribution that engineers make today, as well as the contribution that they have made in the past, to the quality of our lives and the strength of our economy. I endorse much of what the hon. Gentleman said about the importance of engineering and engineers. Those of us who have had the pleasure of listening to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), who was a Minister in the Department of Trade and Industry, will know that he was a passionate advocate of the importance of engineering to our economy. I assure the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend that I am no less enthusiastic on the subject.

We have a problem in this country in that engineering is seen as a glory in our past, rather than a strength in our present and vital to our future; yet British engineering remains a world leader. For example, last week the Royal Academy of Engineering awarded the 1999 McRobert award, our most coveted prize for innovation and engineering, to Buro Happold, the UK engineering partnership that designed the magnificent millennium dome.

It is a pity that so few people in this country realise that the techniques of packet switching, without which the internet could not exist, were devised in Britain by British engineers. Perhaps more people, but not enough, realise that the world wide web, which makes the internet useful and usable to millions of people around the world, was devised by another British engineer, Tim Berners-Lee, and the team with which he worked at CERN, the European centre for nuclear research.

The generation, exploitation and application of knowledge, in which engineering plays a central role, are at the heart of the Government's economic agenda. That was a central theme of our White Paper on competitiveness, "Our Competitive Future: Building the Knowledge-Driven Economy". As the new E-Commerce Minister, I have a role in ensuring, right across government, that we seize and exploit the potential of information and communication technologies, and the convergences between them, in the interests of our economic strength and social well-being. In a wide variety of ways, engineers are creating the backbone and devising the applications that allow full exploitation of those convergent technologies.

As the hon. Gentleman said, perhaps the biggest challenge that we will face in the new century is that of sustainable development. We know that our continued prosperity and quality of life—not only here in the developed world, but across the planet—will depend on our ability to understand, analyse and confront the issues of resources and pollution. We must find new solutions to ensure that growth is sustainable as we raise the living standards of millions of people all over the world who are now living in poverty and destitution. The challenges of environmental degradation which we face will be solved by scientists and, within that group, engineers. In practice, combating global warming and developing efficient renewable energy will be achieved only by the real advances in engineering.

In its widest sense, the engineering community includes hundreds of thousands of people who do not fall within the traditional definition of a professional engineer. The hon. Gentleman referred to definitions by this Department—and presumably the Office for National Statistics—which he regarded as being unsatisfactory in terms of the contribution that engineering makes to GDP. In fact, our definition of engineering goes well beyond the traditional heavy metal-bashing sectors to which he referred. Indeed, the definition of engineering that we use for the purposes of the national accounts is a sensible definition that has been agreed with the Engineering Employers Federation. It is no more helpful for the hon. Gentleman to argue that engineering is the sole support and focus of most of the country's GDP than it would be if I were to argue that information and communications technology is responsible for all our wealth creation—although I could make an equally eloquent case to that effect.

The hon. Gentleman rightly spoke of engineers as practical people. I am a practical politician, and I am interested in what the Government can do in practice to raise the status of engineering. We must ensure that it is promoted as a training option and a career, and fully exploit the contribution that engineers can make. That is why the Government have asked Dr. Robert Hawley, the chairman of the Engineering Council, to review the contribution that the council can make to add value to the activities of the broad engineering community. That will be achieved by promoting engineering and standards in engineering more effectively, building on existing synergies with existing organisations and, more generally, positioning the engineering community within the new knowledge-driven economy. The first part of that work, the definition of strategic objectives, will be completed by the end of January. I will encourage Dr. Hawley to discuss the review team's work with the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby, both of whom will have excellent contributions to make to its work.

I turn to the issue of education. Following the action for engineering initiative, the previous Government established SETNET, the science, engineering, technology and maths network. That is now doing exciting work in schools to raise the quality and improve the coherence of a rather fragmented picture of activities that are aimed at promoting science, engineering, technology and mathematics to school pupils.

Mr. Fabricant: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Do I take it, then, that the Government will be appointing a chief engineering adviser to the Cabinet?

Ms Hewitt: I was about to come to that. I regret that I have not had time to deal with every interesting point that the hon. Gentleman raised.

We are very happy with our chief scientific adviser. Sir Robert May is an eminent and distinguished man with a background in chemical engineering. Some former chief scientific advisers to the Government have been engineers. My understanding is that, contrary to what the hon. Gentleman has said, most other countries have a chief scientific adviser who embraces engineering.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. Time is up for this debate.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

1.30 pm

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): It is somewhat poignant that, following the Government's welcome decision yesterday on beef on the bone, we should today be considering the impact of bovine spongiform encephalopathy on the human food chain, which, alas, will be with us for some time to come. It is in that spirit that I called for today's debate.

My interest in the tragic subject of victims of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease first arose as a result of the case of my constituent, Donna Marie McGivern. Donna Marie died in September this year aged 17 years. Tragically, she was one of the youngest victims of new variant CJD. Prior to her illness, Donna Marie was a caring, intelligent child with a quiet, easy-going nature. She loved music and was an extremely talented Irish dancer. The living room in her home still displays her trophies for dancing and athletics.

In the summer of 1996, aged just 14 years old, Donna Marie began to complain of double vision. By December of that year, she had developed headaches and pains in her legs. Her personality began to change, with uncharacteristic rages, violent outbursts and other evidence of a brain disorder. Before she died, she received what can be described only as heroic care and support from her parents, Marie and James, who coped in the most trying of circumstances. Our hearts and minds as a community stood still, reflecting our seeming helplessness. I know, too, that the family received invaluable support from David Body at Irwin Mitchell, who has provided help for many families in all the constituencies throughout Great Britain. His efforts are greatly appreciated by my right hon. and hon. Friends.

We now know that the new variant CJD is a new and devastating condition. According to the CJD surveillance unit, the United Kingdom organisation established to look into the many difficult and complex issues surrounding new variant CJD, the virus has an incidence in the country of approximately one case per million of the population in one year. So far, 52 people have died of suspected new variant CJD, of whom 48 have been confirmed as having had that disease. A further five patients are still alive. It is conceivable that there are others as yet unidentified, the families of whom, I regret to say, face a distressing future. Deterioration in the patients' condition means that they display initial problems of balance and slurred speech. Many deteriorate quickly to a point at which they have to rely on a wheelchair, and latterly, are confined to their beds, with all the implications of nursing support that that raises.

Only this week, many of us read in the press about the latest United Kingdom victim—Steven McMurry aged just 17 years, from Glasgow, the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar). It was typical of Donna Marie's parents who, having read the article, immediately contacted Steven's family and met them only last night. Steven, too, is displaying all of the horrific symptoms of new variant CJD that I have described. His family are going through a traumatic time, coming to terms not just with his illness, but with the huge array of care responsibilities. Our thoughts are with them.

Mr. Ben Chapman (Wirral, South): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me, but I am unable to give way because of pressure of time. I apologise to him.

I wish to draw the attention of hon. Members to the many difficulties that arise from such a situation. The problems of the victims' families, including those of Donna Marie and Steven, cannot be underestimated. Many families face financial difficulties and problems with transport to and from hosptial. They face logistical problems in arranging child care, and managing ordinary activities, such as shopping and housework—with the minimum of sleep—while caring also for their relative. It is, of course, particularly difficult to deal with such practical problems at a time of enormous emotional strain. Again and again, perhaps because much of this situation is relativley new to society, families have to fight for the care that is needed and lack of funding has sometimes prevented them from receiving the best care. Such families often feel that they understand their relatives' needs and the best way in which to care for them, but they have to wait for professional assessments and often have to argue vigorously for help.

Let us take Donna Marie's experience as an example. In May 1997, her parents asked their general practitioner for a wheelchair. He said that there was a waiting list for such equipment, but that he would make an application on her behalf. Eventually a chair had to be borrowed from the Red Cross. Unfortunately, it was too small. Donna Marie's parents then had to obtain one from the local school for children with learning difficulties. However, that chair fell apart because it was wholly unsuitable for people who suffered sporadic movements of their limbs. By the time an appropriate wheelchair was found, Donna Marie's illness was too advanced and she was confined to her bed. It is hard for any of us to appreciate the frustration that that one aspect of her case must have caused.

It is not only the families who have to go through such distress; it is difficult for professionals, too. They need emotional support when looking after patients and their families. The intensity of their involvement means that they are deeply affected by it. They often lack information and find it difficult to manage a condition with which they are unfamiliar. Too often, families are left to cope with such problems themselves, thus compounding matters further. It is difficult to define patients' needs. Professionals, patients and carers all have different perspectives and values when trying to identify needs or even agreeing on a solution.

The fundamental problem for the families of patients, when diagnosis has taken place, is the lack of a co-ordinated, consistent response to the patients' needs. Even now, 13 years after the first CJD case, there is virtually no consistency of approach by local authorities or community health care services throughout the United Kingdom. The necessary co-ordination simply does not exist. It is clear to all who have had the

misfortune to have had to deal with this deadly virus that the care provision throughout the country, while variable, is uniformly limited. In addition, the support provided by the various bodies that have been set up to offer care and other services to those suffering from new variant CJD is, frankly, wholly inadequate.

The problem can be explained simply. People who know little about the huge range of difficulties are asked to provide informed solutions. Those who know little about the virus, such as local authorities, social services and even GPs, are expected to offer informed care advice. That is not fair on the professionals, nor is it effective when considering that the most important issue of all is the needs of the patient. At one end of the spectrum, there have been several cases in which care support has been incomparably good. In other cases, the absence of effective timely care provision has been a source of bitter grievance, accentuating the grave sense of injustice that is already felt. Because of the broad-based nature of the problem, I believe strongly that a national approach is vital to provide the consistency of provision that is so clearly needed.

The proposal that we should consider—it was recommended by the CJD surveillance unit—involves the establishment of a central fund for sole use by new variant CJD patients and their carers. Those resources could fund a team comprising, for instance, a case manager and a counsellor. It could assess the actual and prospective care needs of the patient, determine the equipment required and suggest alterations that might be needed to make care at home more effective. Crucially, it could also assess the needs of the family and provide support when people have to come to terms with the eventual death of a family member.

We should also bear in mind the possibility that there may be cases in which a person has neither family nor close friends. My hon. Friend the Minister will know that the proposal is a limited-cost project, which is predicted to involve less than £750,000 a year, but it could bring consistency of care to a group of people whose illnesses all hon. Members wish had never happened. I know that my hon. Friend received details of the proposal, and I look forward to hearing his response to the suggestion.

Marie and James, the parents of Donna Marie, had to give up their jobs to look after their child. My hon. Friend the Minister, who will reply with expertise on behalf of the Department of Health, will accept that greater co-ordination is needed between Departments, including the Department of Social Security, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the various United Kingdom Assemblies and the European Union. Has any progress been made in the consideration of compensatory payments—subject, of course to the BSE inquiry?

New variant CJD is a fatal disease. In almost every case, diagnosis of the disease is not possible until after the patient has died. As things stand, there is little prospect of any medical treatment emerging in the foreseeable future. What measures have the Government taken to support further research into finding a cure for new variant CJD?

I accept that the pharmaceutical industry has little to gain in this regard, but a contribution to the funds that are used to respond to this dreadful disease would enhance the industry's standing and I appeal to it to make such a contribution.

Mr. Ben Chapman: One of my constituents, who recently lost a loved one to new variant CJD, is particularly concerned about consistency of care. Does my right hon Friend agree that it is important for such care to be given to all victims of CJD throughout the United Kingdom?

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend who spoke on behalf of one of his constituents and of the many people who are closely following our debate.

If we redouble our research efforts, provide a consistent package of care when and where it is needed, ease the financial worries of those who are involved, respond quickly on a cross-departmental basis and share whatever knowledge there is about this dreadful condition, we would at least be able to claim that progress has been made.

Little Donna Marie McGivern has left us, her potential unfulfilled. If this tragic experience helps to establish a more professional and timely response in similar circumstances, her leaving us, and the passing of so many others, will not have been in vain.

1.44 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) on securing this debate on care provision for new variant CJD patients, and on his speech, in which he gave moving descriptions of the life and death of Donna Marie McGivern. Our sympathies go to her family and to the other families who have been affected by the disease.

I must admit at the outset that we still have many lessons to learn about how to deal with this dreadful new disease. It was only as recently as March 1996 that the first cases of variant CJD were confirmed. Since then, 48 people have died from the disease. Each case has brought its own harrowing tale—a story that only the families and carers who have been closely involved can possibly fully appreciate. We know that variant CJD is invariably fatal, and as the course of the disease follows its grim path of neurological deterioration, it brings with it enormous suffering, and not only for the patients. Perhaps the suffering is felt most keenly by those who have the responsibility for looking after their loved ones and at the same time have to watch them go downhill.

Unlike many other serious diseases, there is still no proven validated test available for a living person that would enable variant CJD to be diagnosed with certainty. The Spongifom Encephalopathy Advisory Committee—the independent committee that advises the Government on BSE and CJD issues—said at its September meeting that the need to develop a diagnostic test should be seen as paramount. The Government understand that requirement absolutely. The Department of Health is funding some £3 million a year into vital research.

[Mr. John Denham]

My right hon. Friend asked a wide question about research. The priority for Government research is treatment. We currently spend about £17 million per annum on research into this related set of diseases. I offer to write to my right hon. Friend setting out the details of the various studies that are covered by that research programme.

Variant CJD, in its early stages, often produces symptoms of anxiety or depression which can mimic the pattern of any number of other psychotic disorders. It is only when the disease moves into its later phase, when profound physical and neurological symptoms reveal themselves, that variant CJD can realistically begin to be seen as a possible suspect. Forty-eight tragic cases is of course 48 too many, but it is still only a tiny proportion of the whole population.

I should like to turn to the needs of variant CJD patients. The course of the disease is unpredictable, which means that needs will not remain static but will change over time. We know that those changes can occur very quickly.

Mr. Mohammad Sarwar (Glasgow, Govan): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Denham: I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not at this stage. If I have time at the end of the debate I shall give way, but I want to reply to my right hon. Friend's speech.

The fact that changes occur quickly means that the management of the condition needs to be rapid and flexible and to be reviewed frequently. Health care will necessarily be provided by a range of different health care professionals. At different times or in combination, patients will require support from a range of clinicians, including neurologists, psychiatrists, specialist nurses and therapists, including physiotherapists and speech and language therapists. For many patients and families their GP and community team will also provide vital care and support.

The national CJD surveillance unit at Edinburgh, which is funded by the Government—it discovered the first cases of variant CJD—is undertaking important work investigating possible cases. Staff at the unit have worked to develop relationships with other neurologists and clinicians with whom patients are likely to have early contact. Building on their experience of dealing with the disease, they are able to provide advice to clinicians and families. To help the unit to develop its role further, the Government decided to fund the provision of a new care co-ordinator post, and the unit is currently advertising for a suitable candidate.

The NHS services needed by patients with variant CJD are in place across the country. It is essential that the care provided by the different professions is co-ordinated, that it is discussed with the patients and their families and carers and that it is frequently reviewed.

The need for such arrangements is not unique to variant CJD. Other rapidly deteriorating neurological conditions, such as motor neurone disease, also require a speedy and co-ordinated approach to health care. According to the surveillance unit, and taking account of all the difficulties that I have explained, there are perhaps six patients who are highly suspected of having CJD and about 3,500 sufferers of motor neurone disease. In that context, we have declined the call to establish a central fund specifically for variant CJD sufferers. All those people will need consistent quality services, and we must work to deliver those services to them as we work to deliver services to others in need.

That co-ordination needs to happen in two ways. First, services need to be co-ordinated for individuals, so that patients receive integrated care packages, which may involve health and social care professions. Secondly, health and social services staff need to work together to ensure that their services are planned and delivered in partnership. I acknowledge that there have been regrettable instances when that arrangement has failed. As my right hon. Friend said, those experiences have not been uniformly bad, but we are trying to make things better.

Provisions in the Health Act 1999 will allow the NHS and social services to overcome the barriers to joint working. For example, pooled budgets for individuals could be set up to provide responsive packages of care that can change quickly when needed. Local managers would need to identify when that might be required, agree to pool funds to provide a future care package and agree in advance who should manage the pool budget. However, as my right hon. Friend said, local service providers will need help to deal with the particular difficulties of caring for CJD patients. Because of the present rate of incidence of variant CJD, most people who work in the medical profession will not come across a case during their working lifetimes, so those who need to tackle it will need appropriate support.

As well as the new post at the CJD surveillance unit, the Department is giving its backing to the CJD support network for the case co-ordination initiative, which aims to improve the co-ordination of care for patients suffering from all kinds of CJD. As a result, more cost-effective care should be provided that is effectively tailored to the changing needs of patients and carers.

Last year, the CJD support network, in collaboration with the Association of Directors of Social Services, produced new guidance on best practice for social care workers. The Department is producing complementary guidance on health care, which we aim to publish shortly. That will focus on the role to be played by key workers, whose job will be to ensure that all the needs of patients and carers are regularly assessed and put into place rapidly. My right hon. Friend spoke of the knowledge and experience of the families and carers of sufferers, and I assure him that voluntary groups representing families of sufferers were involved in preparing that document, and we are confident that it will make a difference.

The Department also supports the Human BSE Foundation, an organisation run by the families of variant CJD victims, which aims to help relatives, friends and carers by providing support, information and practical advice.

The debate has emphasised one of the alarming features of variant CJD, which is that it can target young people. As part of our research programme, the British paediatric surveillance unit of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health is working with the Edinburgh CJD surveillance unit and Addenbrooke's

hospital in Cambridge to look into all cases of progressive intellectual and neurological deterioration occurring in children in the UK.

That project, which has been under way since May 1997, has monitored the incidence of such deterioration and, as far as possible, has determined its cause. Further investigation is encouraged in those cases that do not have a readily identifiable cause, so that we can detect those children who may potentially be suffering from any form of CJD. Results of the unit's work were published earlier this year. Of the 489 cases investigated, no positive results were revealed, although one has since turned out to be a suspect case. I mention the study to reassure my right hon. Friend that we are doing what we can to look out for the development of variant CJD in the young.

Mr. Tom Clarke: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I shall be brief, because I hope that he may have time to give way also to my hon. Friend the Member for Govan. I thank the Minister for his tremendous courtesy in replying to the debate at such length. I also take this opportunity to join him in paying tribute to the CJD surveillance unit at Edinburgh, which serves the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Denham: I shall say a little about the organisation for community care—but less than I would like, so that I can give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Govan. However, I shall rest for a moment on the care of the young.

Children and young people often prefer to be at home in familiar surroundings, which means that they must have adequate support from all the local agencies. I have already emphasised that that requires good co-ordination between the various services. In future, care for children and young people with chronic illnesses such as variant CJD is increasingly likely to be provided in a community setting. That will be achieved by outreach teams that will support the parents, use collaborative care pathways that are agreed by primary care and specialist teams, and work with local authority social services and education departments.

The Government's national strategy for carers, published in February, shows that giving support to carers can also help the people whom they care for. A programme of work is under way to implement the strategy throughout the NHS. It includes raising the awareness of carers' issues when planning, delivering and evaluating services, identifying carers and their own health needs in primary care, and providing information that they need on the health status and the medication of the person whom they are caring for.

Mr. Sarwar: A constituent of mine, Steven McCurry, fell over two years ago, when he was 20 years old. He complained of headaches, slurred speech and difficulty in walking, yet it took 18 months for doctors to diagnose the fact that he was suffering from the new variant CJD. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in view of the increased incidence of CJD, a much more co-ordinated approach is needed from local authorities and health workers, which should be backed up by the Government with greater resources that are specifically directed to dealings with that problem?

Mr. Denham: I am delighted to have the opportunity to reiterate some of the key points of my response.

First, I recognise the difficulties faced by health professionals owing to the fact that we do not yet have a reliable diagnostic test that can be used on a living person to establish the existence of variant CJD beyond doubt. That is a priority for research. Secondly, services must be properly co-ordinated to cope with the needs of individuals so as to ensure that their changing needs—sometimes rapidly changing needs—are reflected in the change of provision. We seek to achieve that through the various initiatives that I have mentioned, including the forthcoming publication of guidance and the funding of the surveillance unit in Edinburgh and elsewhere. For sufferers of variant CJD and a number of other distressing conditions such as motor neurone disease, the challenge is to co-ordinate existing services. That is the key challenge on which we must work, rather than targeting separate or additional funding.

It being Two o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the sitting, without Question put.*

Westminster Hall

Thursday 2 December 1999

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Sea Fishing

[Relevant documents: Eighth Report from the Agriculture Committee Session 1998–99 HC 141 and Seventh Special Report (Government Reply).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mrs. McGuire.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): It is a great privilege to be opening the first debate on a Select Committee report to be held in this place. I believe that it is also the first debate to compete with the main Chamber, so I am pleased to see so many colleagues from all parties here this afternoon.

I confess to some reservations about this experiment, but the widespread welcome received by our report from all parts of the industry and the lobby groups around it perhaps suits this less confrontational style of debate. I am reminded that in New York, the best plays are often off Broadway. I have reservations about the name of this place, but I hope that the best debate this afernoon will be off Westminster Hall.

There is nothing new about a horseshoe style—Select Committees have used it for years—but I understand that Madam Speaker has instructed that there should be some segregation in the Committee, and we are obeying that ruling. Sitting just to my left we have the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ).

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): And the Liberals on the far right.

Mr. Luff: As my right hon. Friend says, we have the Liberals on the far right, which makes a change.

The Government's response to our report was one of the best that we have received, and I am grateful to the Minister and his officials for it. To use a fishing metaphor, it does not look as though the Government will be discarding our report; it was certainly not undersized. With around 90 pages and 58 recommendations, it is one of our larger reports. Its combination of quality and quantity owes everything to the Committee staff and advisers, and I am grateful to them. I commend the photographs on the front cover, which were produced by me and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), who is in the Room. That is the only compliment that he will be receiving from me this afternoon.

During my first year as Chairman of the Agriculture Committee, we held a wide range of inquiries, but the nearest we got to sea fishing was flood and coastal defence. It is interesting that that report also received a fine response from the Minister.

I must strike one note of sadness this afternoon. Three of the key members of the Committee who worked on our report on sea fishing have left or are shortly to leave the Committee. The hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George), who is in his place this afternoon, has a deep knowledge of the industry and contributed greatly to our considerations. He has already left the Committee to take on the onerous responsibilities of speaking on social security for his party—

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): And fishing.

Mr. Luff: And fishing.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), whose exploits in Vigo fish market are probably best forgotten—for reasons which I shall happily share with the Minister at a later date—also contributed greatly to the work on the report. He is sadly missed, although he is now doing great service in Kensington and Chelsea and elsewhere.

We are also to lose the hon. Member for Forest of Dean, who will be replaced if a motion in the House is passed today. It is sad to see her go because she has contributed greatly to our Committee. She was a lively and intelligent questioner and we shall miss her very much.

The real reason for holding an inquiry into sea fishing was that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby would have made my life a living hell if we had not. I share with him a constituent who operates a fish stall in Droitwich Spa market, but at weekends lives in Grimsby, from where he brings all his fish. I feel that I am a kindred spirit with the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, although his constituents have shown little gratitude for the effort that we made in the report to protect their interests. The Worcester *Evening News* stated on Wednesday 24 November under the headline "Fishy sales warning" and "'Grimsby traders' are bullying OAPs":

> "Pensioners are being bullied into paying hundreds of pounds for fish by tradesmen claiming to be from Grimsby. . . . The fish sellers are described as driving a red or orange-coloured Transit van and speaking with northern accents."

I hope that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby will call the troops off and let the pensioners of Worcestershire buy their fish wherever they choose.

I do not claim to have had a deep understanding of the industry before we began the inquiry. Like most Committee members, I approached the inquiry with an open mind and a largely closed mouth, which is perhaps unusual for a politician. I freely admit that, as we conducted our inquiry, I discovered much that surprised me. My first big surprise was that it was possible to inquire into the United Kingdom fishing industry without becoming bogged down in the high politics and intricacies of the common fisheries policy. Others shared that surprise, which many continue to articulate to this day. We set terms of reference that expressly excluded the common fisheries policy from our deliberations, and our report, which was widely welcomed, proved that we were right to do so. Indeed, that great Labour Eurosceptic, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, told *Fishing News* that our report was

> "the best overview of the industry for years."

Like most of my party, I do not like the common fisheries policy. It is far from the ideal tool for managing fish stocks, but it is the best that we have. British fishing policy must not resemble a startled rabbit that is caught

[Mr. Luff]

in the headlights of the common fisheries policy and unable to focus on anything else. A great deal can be done by the Government to help the industry, as our report clearly demonstrates. The Committee put the common fisheries policy to one side because the Europhiles and Eurosceptics—to use those crude terms—understood that simple fact. Moreover, we knew that, on such an important political question, it was unlikely that agreement could be reached on anything worth while. Select Committees are at their best when they operate on the basis of consensus, and I took pleasure from the Government's analysis of our report. They said:

"The Government welcomes this thorough and constructive report".

Today's debate should concentrate not on the common fisheries policy, but on the real and substantive issues raised in the report.

As I said, sea fishing was our major inquiry last year. We began taking evidence in November 1998 and held our final session with the Minister in June. I am glad to see that he holds the same post that he held when the inquiry began. That is a rare feat. Our inquiries were not limited to London; we travelled the length of the country. In February we travelled to Newlyn, which is in the constituency of the hon. Member for St. Ives. In May we travelled to the Shetland Islands, via Grimsby, of course, and Aberdeen. I admit that we also made a detour to Brussels. We visited fish markets and processing plants, and saw for ourselves the industries in Spain and Iceland.

Most important, we listened to the views of enforcement officers, scientists, fish merchants, processors, producer organisations and, of course, fishermen themselves, both individually and through their representative organisations. I believe that I speak for the whole Committee when I say that we were grateful for the warm welcome that we received everywhere. For many of us, our view of the industry changed dramatically. As we travelled, rather like a travelling circus, from a Committee Room in Westminster via a hotel ballroom in Cornwall to a council chamber in Peterhead, we learned a great deal.

I learned that the industry's image is often substantially at odds with the reality. That was my second big surprise. As the report states, although the industry

"is often represented by itself and others as an industry of victims",

many in it have broken with the past, leading to an important political conclusion. Having set out the five essential fishing policy objectives—I refer hon. Members to the report—we said that

"our overriding concern is that the Government establish a settled, transparent long-term strategy for management of fisheries which takes into account the competitive position compared to other EU countries and within which the industry can plan, confident that any necessary changes will apply equally and be introduced fairly, with proper consultation and with regard to clear and agreed objectives. There is a very bright future for the UK sea fishing industry and the Government has to play its part in helping to bring this about."

That conclusion is of fundamental importance. I believe that the people whom we represent in this place like to back winners. Support for the fishing industry would grow if people realised that many fishermen are winning, and that many more could do so in the right environment.

The Committee was pleased with the Government's response to that recommendation. The Government said:

"The Government notes the Committee's suggestion of drawing up an agreed long term management strategy, covering *inter alia* rationalisation of the fishing fleet and fishing ports, and will consider this with the industry."

Judging from our earlier discussion, the Minister has anticipated my first questions. What has been done in respect of that recommendation? Have those joint considerations begun? How will progress be reported to the House and to the Committee?

The more we travelled and the more we saw, the more we became convinced that the sea fishing industry had a bright future. People are investing in boats, embracing new, modern equipment and adapting to the demands of the consumer. As in all other industries, whatever their activities, that is the way to succeed in the modern world. I should say to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby that we were very impressed by the fishermen whom we met in Grimsby. They had overcome their traditional hostility to the supermarkets and were entering into new kinds of contracts, which should bring real advantages to both consumers and the industry. We were especially impressed by the industry in Shetland, although I accept–as I am sure that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby would wish me to point out—that the financial situation there has been helpful in supporting changes in the fishing industry.

Our central strategic conclusion is that the industry must be allowed, as far as is humanly possible, to take charge of its own future. To help it to do so, we made many individual recommendations to encourage co-operation between the different links in the chain from the sea to the supermarket shelf, including scientists, administrators, processors and retailers. We called for a better exchange of information between all parties, measures aimed at encouraging mutual trust and concerted market-led strategies.

My third big surprise was the often low level of trust between scientists and fishermen. Perhaps I should not have been surprised, but I was. In other countries, scientists and fishermen are far more obviously allies in the battle for their industry's success. That is a culture that we must create in the UK. It is not a uniformly disappointing picture—there are some shining examples of good practice in the UK—but the general situation struck me as dispiriting.

As we stated in recommendation 14,

"We recommend that MAFF consult with the scientific community and the fishing industry on the best way to establish a permanent formal procedure for collaboration and consultation on fisheries research."

The Government responded:

"The Government agrees this recommendation and Fisheries Departments and scientists are already in touch with the industry to improve contacts on science and to establish a more formalised approach."

The Minister may have anticipated my next question. What is happening in respect of that recommendation?

My fourth surprise was the lack of multi-species modelling. Our report shows that more than half the fish that disappear from the North sea are eaten by other fish. In that context, multi-species modelling is tremendously important in working out the state of stocks. I was a little disappointed with the Government's response on that. They stated:

"Multi-species work poses considerable scientific and practical problems and"—

I suspect that this is a clue—

"is expensive. It is being advanced in the North Sea to develop the range of scientific methods necessary to understand, and predict, the consequences of management actions in a multi-species context. As such work bears fruit—and as resources permit—it can be transferred to other regions where it is believed multi-species interactions are significant to our fisheries."

I do not find that a confident enough statement about the profound importance of multi-species research.

I emphasise the Committee's overriding concern that the Government should take full account of our competitive position compared to that of other EU countries and apply necessary charges and regulations equally and fairly, with proper consultation with the industry. Given the long-term interest of the industry and the state of stocks, we understand that some regulation is, and always will be, inevitable. However, the Committee felt strongly that more attention could and should be paid to the cost of compliance and the overall regulatory burden when the Government considered new measures for the industry. Both the cost and complexity of the regulatory regime must be minimised.

The Committee also felt strongly that greater account must be taken of our competitive position abroad. That does not mean that UK fishermen should automatically receive extra money if fishermen in another member state receive it, but the Government should increase their awareness of how regulations are implemented and enforced in other countries to ensure that our fishermen are not competitively disadvantaged. As we stated,

"We recommend that the Government prepare an audit of all regulations and their compliance costs relating to the UK fishing fleet".

That leads me logically to my fifth surprise, which I have also experienced in other areas of MAFF's work. The Government do not seem to think that embassies—and, where relevant, high commissions—are there to find out what our competitors do. I regret that, in their response to our report, the Government insisted that it was the responsibility of the European Commission to gather the necessary information. I do not understand that. Why will the Government not use their embassies to monitor implementation and compliance issues in other EU states? It would require very little effort to do that. Keeping an ear to the ground and reading the specialist and local press would suffice.

That line has softened recently in other areas. I welcome that. I hope that the new approach will be extended to fishing. Our posts overseas are best positioned to find out what other Governments are doing. When we impose costs without knowing whether our competitors are doing the same, it is worse than doing it in the full knowledge that they are not. A conscious act of policy to disadvantage a UK industry is generally wrong, but it is a scandal not to know whether one is doing so.

However, I am sure that officials at the Ministry would welcome receiving any evidence of breaches from fishermen and from the fishing industry. The Government have undertaken to investigate any breach, when hard evidence is provided, and I urge fishermen to provide the Minister with that evidence. However, I do not propose to let the Government off the hook. Their response to our concerns about regulation was inadequate. Why will they not agree to a proper, full-scale audit of the regulatory burden facing fishermen?

A sixth surprise is the fact that the trade in licences and quotas—a very valuable trade—is built on sand. What is the legal title to these phenomenally valuable commodities? Whatever one's point of view on individual transferable quotas, it is difficult for someone on the outside looking in to believe that so many millions rest on trusting politicians not to change the policy. We are not normally so easily trusted. MAFF's response to us on that point was a little lame. It may suit Ministers to keep the waters murky, but it does not suit a modern industry. The Government have promised to seek the views of the industry on managing the trade in licences and quotas. They stated:

"There are no plans to change the existing position whereby licences and quotas apply at the discretion of Ministers but with fishermen's interests protected by the legal concept of legitimate expectation. Nevertheless the Departments"—

that is Departments in the plural; it includes the devolved Departments in Scotland, Wales and now, I presume, Northern Ireland—

"will consider, in consultation with fishermen's representatives, if any further steps might be taken to clarify entitlement to licences and quotas under present legislation."

That is better than nothing, but I should like to know what progress has been made on that consultation. What is the timetable for action? Decisions need to be made urgently, and speed is of the essence.

The Committee was not unanimous on the larger question of tradeable quotas, as the report shows, and our recommendations were modest. I suspect that other members of the Committee may speak on this later. Our report stated:

"We recommend that, in conjunction with representatives of the fishing industry, the Government devise proposals for managing the existing trade licences and quota, with a view to introducing them as a matter of urgency. We recommend that the Government consult the fishing industry on the merits and drawbacks of tradeable quotas and the most appropriate form for their introduction in the UK, including the future management role of the POs"—

the producer organisations—

"and the extent of safeguards, for example to protect fishing-dependent communities, and report on the outcome of these consultations within a year."

The Government's response was encouraging, but no time scale was given. They said:

"In the light of the Committee's recommendations the Fisheries Departments in the UK will seek the views of the industry on whether further changes should be made to quota management and what measures might sensibly be taken to manage the existing trade in licences and quota."

Others who speak after me may wish to explore this issue in more detail. It goes to the heart of the question of what structure we want the UK fishing industry to have. There were those outside who expressed doubts on this score, but our trip to Iceland, where the trade in

[Mr. Luff]

quotas is further advanced, did not blind us to the problems that such systems create. We saw the deep controversy that surrounds the system there.

The Government will have to grapple more openly and honestly with the issue than they have before, and I would like to know how those discussions are progressing. We have to make explicit choices and develop clear policies to address the often conflicting objectives of policies in this area, such as helping the more remote fishing ports, encouraging young people into the industry and building an efficient and internationally competitive industry.

I should not have been surprised by how unprepared the Government seemed to be for devolution, but I was. That is the final surprise that I shall mention today. The Government talked about concordats, when they stated:

"The Government notes the Committee's wish for urgency in concluding the subject specific concordats on fisheries management . . . Publication of these documents must be subject to prior agreement . . . bilateral departmental concordats between MAFF and the devolved administrations . . . have yet to be finalised."

The concordat was published on 1 November, which was several months after devolution. I should like to know the background to that issue, to find out how it is developing and how the relationship with the devolved administrations is working in practice.

I should like to discuss many other matters, but other hon. Members are interested in the report and I should let them speak. I suspect that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby will discuss the urban waste water directive. Other subjects that may be mentioned include the scrapping of the vessel safety equipment grant, the level of discards, coastal and zonal management, the marketing, processing and port facilities scheme, new marketing initiatives by the Sea Fish Industry Authority, a range of environmental issues, the role of sea fisheries committees and, above all, the proposed national institute for fisheries in Grimsby. However, I leave those matters to other hon. Members.

The Agriculture Committee wanted to present a positive image of the industry, and I am pleased that the report appears to have been accepted in that spirit. The sea fishing inquiry was one of the most interesting that the Agriculture Committee has undertaken. We hope that we have done something to bring about changes for the better and to focus attention on what—paradoxically—appears to be both a neglected and an over-regulated industry.

Perhaps the most famous thing ever said by a British politician about fish was the comment that Aneurin Bevan made at the Labour party conference at Blackpool in 1945. He said:

"This island is made mainly of coal and surrounded by fish. Only an organising genius could produce a shortage of coal and fish at the same time."

We are getting pretty short of coal mines these days, but there is no reason why sea fishing should share a similar fate.

I assure the Minister that, although the inquiry has been concluded, we shall continue to monitor developments in the industry closely. We are determined that the bright future that we predicted will come about.

2.51 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), who was the Chairman of the Select Committee on Agriculture, and I am glad that in this Chamber we are seated in a semicircle trying to persuade each other. We had a similar experience on the Agriculture Committee. People from all parties and, more importantly, of all views on Europe worked together to produce a good report on fishing. I believe that we succeeded in doing so. The fishing industry's reaction has bee very good—fishing organisations and fishermen have congratulated me on the report. That was a novel experience for an hon. Member whose constituency is based on fishing and whose party is in government. Perhaps that shows how well members of the Agriculture Committee worked together.

The Agriculture Committee produced a good overview of the fishing industry's needs and problems. That was necessary because people do not know much about the industry. It is divided because different interests pull in different directions. Although it suffers from an inferiority complex, it is not paranoid—it has been badly treated, which tends to confuse the issue. Our overview assessed the present situation and considered how the industry could progress to a better future.

With effective conservation, the harvest of the seas could be stabilised and looting and pillaging would end. There has been a desperate need to catch any size of fish just to survive, although that approach has done much damage in the North sea and elsewhere. There is a worldwide overcapacity in fishing, and problems with conservation. Unless we correct those problems, the fishing industry will cease to be effective. We want it to move away from a continual process of improvisation, which involves trying to catch as much as possible, towards an organised and structured system. The industry should co-operate with Governments rather than continue in its antagonistic relationship with them. That was one of the aims of our report.

Fishing has been neglected because it has been low among the Government's priorities. I praise the efforts of my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, who is an effective Fisheries Minister. He made a conscious effort to listen to the industry and he earned its respect. However, where does fishing come in the Government's priorities? It is not as high a priority as it is for other European Governments, who regard fishing as an important industry. More people are employed in the industry in other European countries and it receives more support from European Governments than from the United Kingdom Government. In this country, it makes awkward—and, in a European context, disruptive—demands. The UK Government do not pursue those demands properly because they have to make progress in other areas.

Quota hopping, for example, tends to be moved down the list of priorities to achieve a deal on other matters that, for understandable reasons, are more important to the Government. That is a problem. The Select Committee was impressed by my hon. Friend the Minister's stewardship, by the clarity and straightforwardness of his evidence and by his concern for fishing. I can now hit him with all the things about which we had reservations.

We stayed off the European issue because it would have been divisive in a Select Committee. There is a real problem, however, because fishing was sacrificed in the initial entry negotiations. The deal provided for equal access to a common resource and it is difficult, on that basis, to ensure proper conservation of our waters. The answer always given to those who, like me, whinge on about the common fisheries policy is that co-operative arrangements with European countries would be required. However, if we had not accepted equal access to a common resource, we could have imposed our own common agreements and policy and we could have followed our own conservation needs.

Conservation measures, such as the introduction of square mesh panels and closing off grounds—which we can do against our own fishermen, but we cannot do without agreement against other fishermen—are difficult to achieve because of Europe. It is difficult to reach an agreement on technical conservation measures, which are the way forward and increasingly necessary, because Europe agrees on common, basic, across-the-board, minimal measures. Other countries have been better at building up and retaining their fishing industry—Iceland, Norway, the United States and New Zealand—by imposing a conservation regime that suits their national purposes. The odds are against the regime in which we have to participate because of the basic disparity of equal access for other nations to a common resource. That resource is at its richest in British waters, which in value terms provide three quarters of the catches.

Although the Select Committee stayed off the European issue, it is a genuine problem. As the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire said, it makes Governments prone to impose costs on fishing that are not imposed on competing fishing industries. They are inclined not to support fishing as the industry wants and, I think, needs to be supported, because such assistance is provided through European measures. Our fishing industry falls between stools—for much of the period, it has not had European financing on the scale that Spain and other countries have had. Spain has had considerable European finance to rebuild its fleet. We lost Icelandic waters, but we were not given compensation in the fishing grounds of third parties. Spain, however, benefited from Moroccan waters and a whole series of African waters as compensation for the consequences of entry. Compensation has never been given to this country, even though other fishing regimes receive considerable aid.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Whose responsibility is it that the UK industry in England and Scotland has not had access to such grants, while the industry in Spain and other European countries has?

Mr. Mitchell: That is an opportunistic point, which I might have made two and half years ago but do not make now. It is partly because there would have to be a Treasury contribution to European funding, and partly because we have not achieved the multi-annual guidance programmes that we were set, so we have not qualified for European funding. We have not achieved those multi-annual guidance programmes partly because other nations were transferring their fishing fleets to the British register. By reflagging their vessels as British, they solved the problem of reducing their efforts, but at the same time they were increasing our problem of reducing our own efforts.

I do not want to engage in a party political argument with the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), but it is an objective fact that the industry has not been supported by either Europe or the Government to the same degree that other fishing fleets have been. Our industry now relies on an ageing fleet. We were told in Spain that the Spanish had problems with an ageing fleet too, but their big catching fleet—the large vessels that fish in our waters—is extensively modernised in a way that our fleet is not. The overall figures indicate an ageing fleet, which is not only a danger to safety—I think that my hon. Friend the Minister recognises that—but makes the industry less effective than its European competitors.

We must constantly bear in mind the need to give our fishing industry a deal that is equal—a level fishing ground, as it were—to the aid and support that its competitors have. It is unreasonable to impose extra burdens on it. As we emphasised in the report, we need to keep the matter constantly under review. MAFF must know what costs are being imposed on competitor industries. Why should we put up with the tendency constantly to impose extra burdens on our industry that are not imposed on competitor industries? Waste water charges are a classic instance. Competitiveness means a level playing field, but we do not have that in the fishing industry. That worries me.

While I am discussing the neglect of fishing, we note in the report the way in which safety grants—as well as processing grants, harbour grants and harbour safety grants—were suddenly ditched because MAFF found itself in a difficult financial situation. It came quite out of the blue with terrifyingly short notice. "Sorry," MAFF said, "there is a black hole in our accounts and we cannot pay these grants for safety and other aspects of deep concern to the industry, including processing." The industry should now be applying for support for processing to cover the cost of re-equipment and meeting the standards of the waste water directive, but the grants have all been cancelled, just like that. It indicates an appalling sense of priorities. The low position of fishing in the Government's priorities is unacceptable. I hope that our report does something to redress that by highlighting the problems of the industry.

I do not want to go on because there is no point in repeating the entire report, but its general tenor was that fishing needs to upgrade its game. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister shares that view because we have talked about it constantly and it is in the nature of the evidence that he gave. Our report is written with this question in mind: how can we turn fishing into a more efficient and effective, better skilled, better trained and more stable industry with better investment? Training and education are ways of upgrading the game and I am glad that the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire mentioned the Committee's recommendation, which I want to emphasise, in that regard. Our report states:

"We commend such far-sighted ideas"—

on training—

[Mr. Mitchell]

"to the Government and urge MAFF to explore with the Department for Education and Employment the possibility of establishing a National Institute for Fisheries, on the basis set out in the Grimsby submission".

That is what we need. Training and education have been drastically cut, university courses have been closed and the number of places available on them has shrunk, and there has been a failure to establish a national centre. We were impressed in Shetland by the—

Mr. Luff: The North Atlantic Fisheries college.

Mr. Mitchell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me of that.

The college is impressive. It trains people from all over Scotland. A similar training institution is needed in England. We believe that it should be in Grimsby and we are preparing submissions on that for the Minister. The Government's response to our suggestion for a national institute of fisheries was a little disappointing. They said that it would

"have to be considered in the light of other existing facilities."

We took that into account and there are no adequate existing facilities.

The Government went on to say that the scheme was considered in July 1997 and referred for European funding, which was not taken up because the scheme was not developed. However, now it is developed and our recommendations will be sent to the Minister. As the report says, the Minister's Department and the Department for Education and Employment need to co-ordinate to provide an institution that will upgrade the industry.

Marketing needs to be tackled. Co-operative arrangements with the supermarkets, which are selling more fish, would help to bring their strength and power to this industry. The role of the supermarkets is in contrast to that of the jobbing people who are plaguing constituents elsewhere. The report that I read said that they were posing as coming from Grimsby. People pose as doctors and perform operations, but that does not mean that they are qualified. To come from Grimsby implies a weighty role and a sense of honour and integrity that is alien to the people who have been selling lorry loads of fish to poor pensioners for thousands of pounds—although it is interesting that pensioners are able to buy lorry loads of fish for such high prices.

Marketing needs to be upgraded to involve the supermarkets, which are an unexplored resource. We need their commitment. The co-ordination of markets, in particular the supermarkets, with the catching of fish needs to be upgraded. That would mean better catches of bigger fish and would cut out the discards. We could cut down on fishing that is not for human consumption. The plague of industrial fishing continues. It is damaging the stocks by killing and catching young immature fish on a scale that is unacceptable when the resource is so depleted. Where do we draw the line? We need to stop industrial fishing.

Fishing needs to be put on a higher level so that it is a more efficient, effective and better invested industry. We emphasise that in our report. The fishing industry cannot do that on its own. I realise that it is convenient for Ministers to say that catches are down but prices are up, and a viable industry is able to provide for itself. But fishing cannot do so; it needs Government leadership and a measure of Government support.

Committee members can argue about how much support the industry needs. When we wrote the report, there was a divergence of view between the free marketeers, who believe that industry should not be supported by Government, and those members who were acquainted with the needs of fishing and who wanted some Government support. Both views were held by people at either end of the political spectrum; it was a cross-party argument. The free marketeers won on too many issues. It is interesting to hear those same free marketeers, whose farming constituents are clamouring for help, say that it is important to sustain that industry with Government support. They were not prepared to give that support to fishing. However, I do not want to make a party political point.

Mr. Luff: I must leap to the defence of the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) whose intellectual analysis of every situation is rigorous and consistent, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman will confirm.

Mr. Mitchell: I heard my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire, who has agricultural constituents, say something about the need to give temporary financial support to farmers in difficult marketing conditions, who were affected by the rise in the price of the pound and the collapse of eastern European markets. The argument becomes one of self-interest.

It is diffcult for the fishing industry to act on its own without leadership and without Government involvement. We were impressed by the way in which the Shetland industry has developed, the way in which it has bought quota, the way in which funding is given and the way in which the industry is trying to provide entry for young fishermen, who find it increasingly difficult to enter the industry because costs are so great and because the banks are so reluctant to lend the necessary money, given the uncertainties. The Shetland industry has been able to do that because it has had money available—initially highlands and islands development money. More important, oil revenues have been invested and loans have been provided from that money to keep the Shetland industry going. The rest of the industry does not have such a resource and, without it, upgrading such as has occurred in the Shetlands is difficult to achieve.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I was interested in the Shetland scheme—I have discussed with the industry how it achieved that. I was anxious to be assured that such a scheme, which has the advantage of being underpinned by oil revenue, was not unfair to sections of the industry without that advantage. The argument that I heard there was that the scheme amounted to a business arrangement—the quota was held in trust and was leased by the fishermen. They were paying a commercial return. In fact, they complained that the return that they were paying was more than a commercial return.

Mr. Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right; annoyingly, he usually is. However, the issue depends on timing and

stages. Previously, many of the quotas bought from Grimsby were purchased with highlands and islands funding when that was more widely available. Now, there is a commercial loan system. The important point is that Shetland's local authority has money available that can be used by, and has been offered to, the fishing industry; banks in many other parts of the country will not make money available on the same commercial basis.

Mr. Morley: I apologise, but I must point out that Grimsby's producer organisation has bought a fair amount of quota recently on a completely commercial basis.

Mr. Mitchell: Of course that has happened—everyone is rightly in that game. However, that purchase occurred after a disastrous loss of quota—mostly to Shetland, but also to other parts of Scotland—which was in danger of making the size of the Grimsby fleet unviable. A fleet of a certain size is needed to support a centre for excellence in fishing. We arranged that scheme to buy back and to keep quota in the port because the loss of quota was putting the fleet in danger of falling below that size. That was a sensible precaution which everybody has to take. Shetland has advantages in that game that the rest of the country lacks.

My hon. Friend said—I am sure that he was right—that the Shetland industry was not given a commercial advantage. However, it is more difficult for other sections of the fishing industry to raise from commercial loans and from banks money equivalent to that available in Shetland—the struggle is tougher.

I have been diverted from coming to my conclusion; I was going to have a ringing conclusion. However, I wish to consider the waste water directive. The Select Committee recommended that that directive should be phased in. It will apply to the Grimsby fishing industry first. Anglian Water Services has been able to build a waste treatment plant outside the town at Pyewipe. A plant will eventually be built at Hull and others will be built in other ports, but Grimsby is on the front line. At first, charges increased by 500 per cent. or, in some cases, by 1,000 per cent.—they were massive. By a series of negotiations, we had the charge brought down to a two and a half times increase—still a massive increase for small processing firms. I am talking not so much about the big processing firms which will face an isolation of costs as about small firms and fish merchants who process on the premises. They have invested considerable sums to install treatment equipment. That is a big burden for a small firm—a big firm may be able to bear such a cost, but Government help should be available. An expression of horror has just crossed the face of my hon. Friend the Minister.

Help is given in other countries. The industry in France benefits from 75 per cent. financing of the clean-up machinery. We do not benefit in this country. I accept that the increase is down to two and a half times, but the amount is still massive. In the light of our report, the Chairman of the Select Committee and I wrote to Anglian Water Services, which has since then maintained a stunning silence. Further letters to it from fish merchants suggesting that the charge should not be applied have been referred to its legal department. That seems ominous, but it is unfair and unacceptable that the charges should be imposed at a higher level on Grimsby when a new system of reviewing the charges will be introduced, as the Government said in their reply. Why should the costs be imposed in Grimsby before then? They will distort competition and hit the town, where a large number of merchants need to be maintained to set a better price for fish.

I commend the report to the Government. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will examine it seriously because it represents many of the lines along which he is thinking. The industry needs sustained help and support from Government if it is to move forward in the way that the report suggests.

3.16 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to speak in this important fishing debate. I congratulate the Chairman of the Select Committee on Agriculture, the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), on the way in which he not only chaired the debate and inquiry, but presented the findings of the Select Committee this afternoon. I welcome to the debate the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss). I think that this is his first time speaking on behalf of the official Opposition on this subject and, given the comments of his predecessor, it will be interesting to hear what he has to say about the industry.

We embarked on the inquiry with some trepidation. There are at least two inevitable outcomes when a politician pops his head above the parapet to get involved in fishing matters. First, the usual handful of head-bangers are provoked on to their high horses to go on about Europe and, secondly, the media usually ensure that several angry fishermen are wheeled out to tell the politicians in no uncertain terms how out of touch they are with the industry and that they should give up and go away.

On the first point, fish may not be bright, but at least they do not have any hang-ups about their nationality. As for the second point, fishermen are, of course, right. Politicians cannot understand entirely the realities of the fishing industry. We are not out with fishermen all the time. We cannot experience what they experience, but we can and should begin to recognise their problems. Discussions with the fishing industry usually result in a fudged stalemate until the next time an unwary politician or political committee stumbles inadvertently on the subject. It remains a political no-win area, which is probably why the leader of the Liberal Democrat party gave it to me. It is usually avoided, preference being given to issues over which spin doctors can exert more control.

The problem is that fishing policy has become piecemeal and reactive. As they always rush for the politically sunlit uplands of health, education or law and order, politicians do not generally understand the problems faced by fishermen—and fishermen do not understand the problems that politicians have with the fishing industry.

If one were to contrive a position from which to establish a really bad fishing policy, one could do no better than the current one, and the unhealthy stand-off does not help, because it results in a short-term, reactive, piecemeal fishing policy. I do not criticise the

[Mr. Andrew George]

Government, because the Select Committee tried to be apolitical, but under successive Governments our reaction to the fishing industry has been instinctive and we inevitably react to short-term problems rather than look at the medium and long-term solutions to the problem. I endorse the main recommendation of the Select Committee that there should be a coherent, joined-up vision of where British sea fishing policy is heading in the medium and longer term.

The country must know where its fishing industry is heading in the next five to 10 years. Some argue that we do not give the fishing industry sufficient importance. I agree. In political terms, priority is given to consolidating the regulations on sea fishery committees and so on, but the Government cannot find sufficient parliamentary time to introduce primary or secondary legislation to tidy things up.

The Select Committee found that £108 million per annum is expended on research, enforcement and so on, which represents 7 per cent. of the value of the fishing industry to the UK. That is a phenomenally large proportion of its overall value. We cannot argue that we devalue our fishing industry in financial terms.

If we were trying to plan a successful fishing industry, a good starting point would be Spain. Compared to the UK, Spain operates a relatively successful fishing industry. A fisherman in La Coruña was asked why he was successful and we were not. He answered, "You need three things for a successful fishing industry. You need fish, you need a means of catching them and you need a market." We have not yet got any of those factors right. We are worried about a continual decline in our fish stocks. A great deal more needs to be done to manage it properly.

British cosumers tend to like fish without skin and without the bone, in a fairly square shape, white and preferably covered in batter. That does not make for a good fish market. For example, 80 to 85 per cent. of the fish landed in Newlyn in my constituency, which is a larger catch in terms of value than that of any fishing port in England or Wales, is exported, mainly to Spain and also to France.

We need to look at the industry from each of those points of view. I begin with stock. One of the Select Committee findings, which should be further emphasised because we have not yet learned from it, is that in those countries with a successful fishing industry—particularly Spain and Iceland—the relationship between scientists and fishermen is good. To a certain extent, that applies also to Shetland, where the North Atlantic Fisheries college operates. One has to learn something from that. There must be give and take on both sides. It is not right for the Government to say, "Well, it's time fishermen started behaving and recognising the importance of science," and I do not think that the fishermen should have things the other way round.

The relationship needs to be worked at and improved and, although it has improved over the past three or four years, a great deal more needs to be done. One of the criticisms that the Select Committee made of the system operated at present, which has been operated under successive Governments, is the eleventh-hour annual brinkmanship over the setting of quotas and total allowable catches.

The Minister accepts that such brinkmanship happens. We will go through the process again within weeks of the start of the next fishing year on 1 January, and fishermen still do not know exactly what quota will be set for the next year. There are still arguments to be had, which is unsatisfactory. Fishermen have been told far too late in the day what the likely TACs and quotas will be. We need to find ways to avoid such brinkmanship if we are to go forward in a way that will improve that relationship.

The Committee recognised that, even if it is not possible to stick legally to the Committee's recommendation of setting multi-annual quotas in subsequent years, scientists know a great deal about the likely recruitment-age profile of key species. Scientists can set and the Government can agree to quotas in future years to allow the fishing industry to plan.

In my off-the-record discussions with them, fishermen voice increasing fear about stock collapse or near-collapse in several important species. The Minister is aware of that. I met him recently to discuss bass in area VII, where stocks are in a poor state. I agree with his approach of bringing in a 5-tonne-a-week limit on landings per boat.

The Select Committee specifically cautioned the scientists and the fishing industry about going too far with deep water trawling when seeking new fishing grounds and opportunities, especially in relation to the deep-water north Atlantic species, about which we still know little. We have ageing techniques for assessing the impact of fishing on both grounds and species for only three of the 340 species known to live in the deep Atlantic. In that sense, there is a need for greater joint investment by fishermen and scientists.

The subject of inshore fishery was alluded to by the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire. We would like the importance of the sea fisheries committee to be fully appreciated. In future negotiations, the sensible extension of limits from six to 12 miles is desirable and I hope that the Minister will push for that.

Sea fisheries committees need the Acts under which they operate to be clarified and consolidated. The powers that they can use are complex and there is confusion. For example, although the Environment Agency is responsible for estuaries there is a quarter of a mile overlap between two authorities. As I said earlier, the sea fisheries committee has set a landing limit of 37 cm for bass, but the agency has set a limit of 36 cm. Such details must be tidied up, and sea fisheries committees deserve support in that.

The purpose of the powers is to protect the stock and the industry. In any overview of the industry, the inshore fishery and the effect of low-impact fishing should not be overlooked, as it often is. The Minister knows my view that we should put greater emphasis on seeking ways in which to encourage low-impact fishing, such as mackerel hand lining and bass pole-and-line fishing. It is absurd that mackerel hand-liners are in the quota system, but they have not been taken out of it because, we are told, it has been difficult to define them exactly.

I know from recent meetings that the Minister recognises that it is possible to reach a definition—for example, a maximum of one mackerel hand-line per man and four lines per boat. It is not beyond the wit of man or woman to define low-impact fisheries sensibly or to negotiate in Europe and with Norway the removal of such catching techniques from the quota system.

It is important to recognise that it is possible to make a living from the most rudimentary fishing methods. In farming, conventional wisdom dictates that the only future is in greater intensification, capitalisation and labour productivity, but fishing can provide a living for those who practise low-investment, low-intensity and low-impact methods, and that should be recognised and encouraged. People can make a living using mackerel hand-lines.

The Minister will be aware of another encouraging finding on management. It was emphasised time and again that many fishermen and fishing leaders are prepared to consider new methods of fishery management. Environmental organisations and large fishing interests are prepared to consider no-take zones and closed areas and seasons. The encouragement of those management techniques will produce environmental, stock and financial benefits. The Minister would do well to work with his European colleagues in seeking to introduce those techniques as swiftly as possible.

Appropriate emphasis has been placed on individual transferable quotas. I agree that we need to avoid the problem experienced in Iceland; we cannot skirt around the fact. We can learn from that track record. I do not want formal ITQs to be introduced unless the problems have been solved properly in a social market. Those issues include the state conveying "undeserved" wealth to owners and the impact on small communities. In Iceland 10 of the 67 ports were particularly affected. Some lost their entire quotas. Quotas were being traded at enormous prices, which kept young people out of the industry. If the Government intend to go foward with another round of decommissioning, I believe—as does the industry—that they should review the fact that skippers can sell their track record.

On 21 May, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced the withdrawal of fishing safety grants. After due consideration, on 1 June the Deputy Prime Minister announced, with a fanfare of publicity, the reversal of that decision in respect of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. On 2 November, the Deputy Prime Minister quietly sent a letter to the chief executive of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations stating that it could not go forward with the proposal, partly because it was unprepared for devolution. The proposal has now been kicked back to MAFF. That is not good enough. Fishing safety is vital. In my constituency, where we lost 10 men to the sea in 18 months, it is paramount. The Minister must look at the matter again and realise that fishermen deserve support in investing in fishing safety.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) referred to the proposal for a national institute for fisheries. Although, as he said, it was based on the Grimsby submission, that does not necessarily mean that it would be in Grimsby. There are certainly some very good places from Shetland to Cornwall and, with information technology, there is no reason why the work that such a national institute could do should not be spread around all the fishing ports so that all can benefit from improved access and focus.

I commend the Committee's report to the House.

3.37 pm

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): I begin by adding my congratulations to you on your appointment, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in this debate in Westminster Hall. Congratulations are also due to the Modernisation Committee. This format is ideal for debating Select Committee reports because it provides for a more consensual and less confrontational and oppositional approach, which is similar to the approach that we deployed when we carried out the sea fishing inquiry.

I should like to say how innovative the inquiry was. That is wonderfully illustrated by the cover of the report, which is just like a magazine. However, it was not designed only to display the camera prowess of my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) and the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff); it was designed in the hope of attracting a wider readership. We are aware that House of Commons Select Committees perhaps do not have the readership that they should have and we thought that the cover might be a way of encouraging a wider public to take on board what we have to say. The cover also illustrates the various facets of the fishing industry. My only criticism is that it does not show any consumers actually eating the stuff.

The fishing industry is often perceived as an industry of victims—although, with my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby as its champion, perhaps we should not worry about that too much. I believe that with proper guidance from the Government, the industry has the opportunity to be successful. It is true that it has to meet the challenges of a competing and increasingly global market, and that it is governed by a large amount of regulation, which is imposed mainly to preserve the natural resources that are harvested from the sea.

The Committee discovered several instances in which regulation is not only copper-bottomed and seriously enforced, but overladen. That seems to be peculiar to the United Kingdom—perhaps it is due to our bureaucratic past. However, against those challenges, local communities such as those in Shetland and Cornwall, who form their own co-operatives to add strength to themselves and value to their product, increase their opportunities in mass markets. There are also opportunities in small niche markets for specific products and luxury items for the tourist trade, in the local community and restaurants.

It is unfortunate that successive Governments have been unable to give a clear lead to the industry. They have been unable to deliver a settled, coherent strategy for the management and development of the fishing industry. The present Government are aware of that and my hon. Friend the Minister is determined to put in place such a strategy. The Government's response to our report shows that they are willing to adopt such a strategy.

I want to focus on two areas of the report: research and the marketing of fish. If the long-term success of stocks and the industry is to be safeguarded, it is vital to

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have sustainability of resources. Everyone agrees. However, to do that, we need to know the extent, quality and projected future of those resources. Stocks must not be out-fished; they must be fished only to safe levels. Therefore, we introduced regulation, with total allowable catches for each important species, which were then divided into quotas. That is what causes so much frustration and anger among fishermen. They argue again and again that the quota levels are wrong, the total allowable catches are wrong, and the information is wrong, and that they are given the information too late and cannot plan for the future.

The setting of the total allowable catch is done following the collection of data by scientists through the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, which comprises 19 member states. The research is scientific and carried out rigorously in the context of the regulatory system. But how accurate is it? There is much concern that it is inaccurate. How much confidence do fishermen and the industry have in it? I suggest that there is little confidence in the quality and robustness of the research. Is enough being done to communicate the results to the fishing industry? Even ICES

"has expressed concern about the quality of catch and effort data from most of the important fisheries in the ICES area".

The Minister has said that the advice given by ICES was

"as accurate as it can be within the restraints they face."

The science is very difficult and very inexact. One of the main problems is that counting fish in the sea is not easy. They do not hang around waiting for a scientific trial to be carried out in a specific area. It is a taxing problem. Fish are animals in a natural environment. They move from area to area with the seasons, depending on climatic conditions and at different times of their cycle. Counting them scientifically is a taxing problem.

Without accurate knowledge of the population and the age profile of a species in a fishing ground at a specific time, it is impossible to achieve stability to ensure that fish are not fished out. The single most important source of information for annual assessment is the fishermen's own record of catch and effort, with data coming from more than 55,000 fishing chips—[*Laughter*]—fishing trips in England and Wales, but fish and chips when they return to land. They measure the landings. There is an assessment of discards and ICES makes provision for that, but I suggest that that is a rule-of-thumb adjustment. When we visited the Vigo Centre of Oceanography in northern Spain, we learned that it estimates that 33 per cent. of catches are discarded globally. In a recent paper, the European Commission put that figure as high as 50 per cent. If we are basing scientific evidence on landings when we know that 50 per cent. is discarded, we are already horrendously inaccurate. Landings have little in common with what is being fished. As was said, there is little contact between fishermen and scientists in the UK.

In his evidence, Mr. Michael Hosking, who is a Cornish fisherman, said that a survey is conducted only once a year. The composition of the catch is not examined, and the time of year of the survey and the gear used are not taken into account. At this point, I should mention another innovation that the Committee introduced. Instead of dragging fishermen to the House of Commons to give oral evidence, we visited them at the Queen's hotel, Penzance, where Mr. Hosking spoke. Listening to him and others while looking out at the steely blue sea and the departing fishing boats gave one a genuine feel for the subject. In the light of Mr. Hosking's evidence, it came as no surprise to discover that fishermen have no confidence in the research or the science.

I shall quote another fisherman, Mr. Robert George, who gave evidence to the Committee. As his description of himself shows, he is an experienced fisherman. He said:

"I am Robert George and I started fishing when I left school in a cove boat from the beach. I progressed to a crabber from Newlyn and then to a gill-net boat in the 1970s and then into a trawler, a seine-net boat and then into the boat I have got now. We started in this boat pair-trawling from Markle here in the Inch and then we went into a seine-net fishery. We fished Southern Ireland into the North Sea during the winter months and then we were in the North Sea working from Aberdeen from November to Easter for six or seven years. That was up until nine years ago, 1989, when in the Shetlands one of my crew was killed. Since then we have fished 12 months a year off the Irish coast on a fast-net, seine-net."

On the subject of the science, he says:

"I do not think anyone has any idea how much fish has been landed in certain places over the last few years . . . The scientists know it is a load of rubbish, and I'm sure it is."

So we have real problems with the quality of, and confidence in, the science.

According to Mr. De Rozarieux, who is chief executive of the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science boats that are used for survey and research purposes are out of date compared with those used by fishermen. The gear is 20 years old and does not reflect changes in technology.

Mr. Morley: I shall deal with some of the points to which my hon. Friend has referred in a moment. With regard to CEFAS boats, the same gear, which may well be out of date by modern standards, is used because the catch is measured by visiting the same spots at the same times. To get a consistent response and an accurate idea of fish stocks, the same gear has to be used each time.

Mrs. Organ: I thank the Minister for that intervention. Nevertheless, one must concede that there are particular problems with the quality of research and the models used. As the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) said, when in Iceland we discovered that half the fish that, as it were, go missing, are eaten by other fish, but our models for sustainability of resources do not take that into account. There are problems with the robustness and accuracy of the science. As a result, there is a lack of confidence in the figures and quotas.

Mr. Luff: The Minister's intervention was interesting and I believe that he is right. It is also interesting to note that the experienced fishermen to whom the hon. Member for Forest of Dean referred are unaware of the point that the Minister made. That shows that, as the hon. Lady says, there is a gulf between fishermen and scientists.

Mrs. Organ: Absolutely. There is no real communication between scientists and fishermen and

we must improve on that. We need much more sophisticated models that provide better outcomes. We need greater involvement on the part of the fishing industry in approaches to research. We need a financial relationship with the industry, as happens in Spain. Those in the industry should contribute towards research, so that they feel that they own it and are involved in it. We need a wider consensus on the methodology used throughout the industry. We need closer working relationships, which the Chairman of the Select Committee identified. We need more observers on board more ships and we need scientists to be on board more frequently, to develop better procedures.

The Government spend a high percentage on research in comparison with other EU members, although, as the hon. Member for St. Ives mentioned, with 7 per cent. of the industry's gross value of landings, we are getting poor value. The money could be used more efficiently and effectively. We should look more closely at the self-regulated fishing industry in Iceland, which is a model for research commitment and development. We spend a lower percentage on research than Spain, which has very good research opportunities and a better budget. Spain spends between £150 and £180 million a year, while we spend £108 million.

On the special problems connected to devolution in Scotland, it is important that the UK Government should ensure that research is co-ordinated and not duplicated. Fisheries Research Services in Aberdeen, which used to be funded by the Scottish Office, should be used to assist in the overall work of research. The current research vessels are not being used to their full extent, which is mainly because of their age. I urge the Minister to ensure that the new research vessel comes into commission as soon as possible, perhaps before the four-year time scale. In the meantime, specialised vessels should be commissioned by charter to cover the extra effort that is needed to improve scientific work. The programme must not be allowed to fall to the level of one ship, which it seems is possible. We should also spend more on other areas of research, such as the economic performance of the sea fishing industry and the economic issues surrounding the design and implementation of fisheries measures. The UK spends very little on such areas directly, and we could learn much about the industry if we increased such spending. All those problems must be tackled to achieve more credible data and greater confidence in the industry. Everyone should feel that they can understand the regulatory measures.

I do not have a constituency interest in sea fishing, as I represent the Forest of Dean, which has no coastline at all. I am more concerned with eel, elver and salmon fishing, in our great River Severn and beautiful River Wye. As I want all my constituents to live a happy and healthy life, however, I have an interest in the eating of fish. I eat little red meat, although I would not want the farmers to know that, but I am a keen fish eater. Whether the industry thrives is dependent on the continued and increased consumption of fish, so the marketing of fish is crucial to success. Fishermen are more aware of customer demand than they ever have been. The development and strengthening of producer organisations have provided fishermen with an opportunity to market their fish better and add value to their product. As was mentioned earlier, there is always a place for the niche, luxury market. There are other enhancement strategies, however, such as eco-labelling to highlight the promotion of a sustainable method of fishing. Much needs to be done to promote eco-labelling of fish, such as mackerel, as consumers are not widely aware of what it is, what it stands for and what value it has. If the public can be informed, however, there is much benefit to be had, as is evidenced by the marketing of dolphin-friendly tuna.

As for the wet fresh fish market, consumers are becoming increasingly demanding. On a cold, wet trip to Iceland, on a boat out of Reykjavik, I was surprised to hear that a skipper had been contacted on a mobile phone by Harrods food hall with a request for 500 kg of flounder for its customers on Saturday morning. It was then Thursday afternoon and the skipper had caught only half that amount. The rest of it was alive and kicking in the north Arctic seas. The skipper agreed the contract and the price and he went out that afternoon to get the other half of the catch. He got his processors to work through Thursday evening and into Friday morning. The catch was delivered to the airport on Friday morning, flown to London at Friday lunchtime and at 8.30 on Saturday morning it appeared fresh on the slab in Harrods food hall. It is amazing that fish that were swimming around in the Icelandic seas on Thursday evening can be bought and eaten for breakfast on Saturday morning in London. It will be difficult to compete with that, but it has to be done.

The market is dominated, I am glad to say, not by Harrods food hall but by the major multiple retailers. They want freshness, choice, a guaranteed supply of volume, increasing traceability and higher hygiene standards. In the United Kingdom, we have dramatically raised hygiene standards for meat in recent years, but the same needs to be done for fish. We once spent an early morning in Vigo sidestepping mountains of shark, swordfish and monkfish, the largest of which were literally thrown on to the concrete floor. Hygiene standards have a long way to go. The situation was not very different in Newlyn.

The main market value of fish is mostly in the frozen sector, but the fresh sector accounts for one third of the market. The market dominance of the supermarkets is rising. They account for 60 per cent. of fresh fish sales and 70 per cent. of frozen fish sales, and the figures are rising. In 1996, they were responsible for only 50 per cent. of such sales.

Although the industry has been supply driven, the dominance of the multiple retailer, who wants continuity of supply, consistency and standardisation, has created many structural programmes in the supply chain. The Sea Fish Industry Authority should consult the industry, take account of supermarkets' views, devise a marketing strategy and deal with the whole process, from the catching sector through to the suppliers. It should do so with the aim of increasing the competitiveness of the UK industry.

The Food Standards Agency, which will be set up next April under the chairmanship of Professor John Krebbs, has a role to play. We need to campaign hard to convey how healthy, nutritious and convenient fish is for all ages, especially the elderly, who need light nutritious meals, and those who are on a diet and who want to look after their waistline. The FSA should encourage consumers to eat more fish. Many people

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have problems with it—they think that it looks funny and they do not know how to cook it or turn it into a meal. We have not really overcome that problem and serious promotional work is needed. However, the popularity of salmon steaks shows that success is possible. At one time, they were rarely bought, but now they are regarded as convenience food.

I hope that the FSA will work so hard that our consumption levels will reach those of the Spanish, who eat six times the amount of fish that we do. Fish is good stuff. It is good to eat and it is good for people. If the Government give a helping lead, the whole of the UK fishing industry has a bright future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. Before we make further progress, I must make a short appeal. If the speeches of hon. Members who are waiting to speak are as long as some of those that have been delivered, it will be difficult for everyone who wants to speak to do so. I believe that three hon. Members want to speak, after which I shall call the Front-Bench spokesman. I know that my ruling may be hard, but I hope that hon. Members will bear it in mind.

3.58 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): I shall bear your injunction in mind, Madam Deputy Speaker, and agree with two points that have already been made without elaborating on them.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) discussed the waste water directive, which is a burden on the industry. Another burden that we should consider is the integrated pollution control mechanism, which is intended for the intensive livestock sector. There are legitimate arguments about how much one should subsidise an industry, but there are parallel arguments about the burdens that one should impose on an industry. Those two factors should be considered together.

I also agree with the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George), who mentioned fisheries safety grants. We recognise that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was under financial pressure. However, the Deputy Prime Minister leapt in with much publicity to say that he would bail us out and that the situation was unacceptable. Suddenly, the mountain labours and brings forth a mouse—[*Laughter.*]—nothing happens, the grants have been suspended and the matter is back in the hands of MAFF. The lesson there is that people should reflect before putting themselves in that situation.

When this inquiry started, I had a certain set of ideas or postures about the industry. One was that controls and bureaucracy were multiplying, another that not much was being done for conservation. The Ministry had introduced designated ports, which had been around for a long time. However, every time there is a new stock, the industry goes for it hell for leather regardless of injunctions to exploit it reasonably and one ends up with more regulations.

In the case of North sea prawns, everyone thought that they had discovered a gold mine and no one took a blind bit of notice of any injunctions to be reasonable. The result is that there are now quotas on North sea prawns. We shall debate cod in a few days–a fish that seems to spend its life on the borders of crisis and extinction. Much of the regulation exists because fishermen have shown that they are not prepared to exercise restraint.

We are not delivering conservation or a sustainable fishery under the present regulations. One reason is that fishermen do not have a sense that they own the policies–I know that the word "ownership" is fashionable nowadays. Many fishermen say how much the present system obliges them to cheat or to find ways round it. They do not believe that the policy is working in their interests. There has been some improvement recently: the black fish problem is probably not as bad as it was. However, we still have a problem and need to create a system with which fishermen will feel at ease—one that will serve their interests. They would then want it to work and would be willing to take part in an enforcement policy.

The industry is extremely fragmented and, frankly, often bloody-minded. There is not a single UK industry—there are a dozen. The differences between Shetland, Peterhead, Aberdeen and the south-west of England are legion. Those places have few interests in common. It is difficult to apply a policy across that whole, fragmented industry. If the Minister intends to seek consensus on that policy, we shall be here until the next millennium and he still will not have one. The time has come for him to make up his mind about what is right and to get on and do it.

We are also dealing with an aged industry, in terms of the people involved in it and the equipment that they use. There is pressure on them to go to sea for longer and to cut corners. That creates a safety risk and there is a penalty to be paid in the quality of the fish landed because it does not reach the ports and the retail sector as quickly as it should.

The industry also consumes vast amounts of public expenditure—the Minister mentioned £108 million a year for 18,000 primary producers. If that were applied to a relatively small agricultural sector such as potato production, I suspect that the chips would be worth more than the fish, to use an analogy mentioned earlier. The industry is changing, however, and one must not be tempted to attribute a particular mindset to it. For example, important market mechanisms are being introduced into the operation of the pelagic sector, which is principally Scottish and, on the whole, well invested. People are content with that.

Given that this panoply of regulation does not seem to be doing the job, is there another system that could? More precisely, is there a way in which the market might deliver what regulation does not? Have there been experiences elsewhere in which resorting to market mechanisms has delivered a more sustainable fishery? I am not seeking the transposition of the entire system. I merely wonder whether there are elements of experience elsewhere that could be relevant in the United Kingdom. How would we strike a proper balance between a regulatory process and one in which the market could take some of the strain?

What are we looking for? By what standards would we judge this system? There must be optimal exploitation of the stock. It would be absurd not to get

the most out of it, while leaving it sustainable. The industry must be profitable—there is no point if people make no money, because investment must be generated to modernise. The resource must be sustainable and the marketplace must want the product, which must also be delivered to that marketplace. Frankly, we want a limit to public expenditure; as the hon. Member for St. Ives said, no other sector of the economy gets anywhere near the same commitment of public expenditure in proportion to the value of the industry. We also want a system that reasonable fishermen feel is working for them and with which they are at ease.

Other criteria are perhaps more optional. Do we want to maintain traditional fishing communities? There is a choice. On the whole, we have chosen not to maintain traditional coal mining or steel making communities and there is no point in pretending that a fishing community has a different moral value from any other economic community.

Mr. Andrew George: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Does he accept that the existence of the fishing industry in many traditional communities adds to the area's tourism potential? That does not apply to the same extent to coalmining and steel making communities, wonderful as they are.

Mr. Curry: I would be interested to know to what extent that is true. If we are to consider economic importance, I can understand that the hon. Gentleman would wish tourism to be calculated as part of that, but I would be interested to see the results.

Mr. Salmond: Aside from the tourist potential, some of us like the idea of maintaining traditional fishing communities. Had it been possible, we would have liked the idea of maintaining traditional coal and steel communities, too.

Mr. Curry: I am sorry that the wonderful consensus that we all set out to produce appears to be fragmenting at such an early stage—rather like the industry itself. I was merely saying that we have already decided that we are not willing to pay the price of maintaining many communities in Britain and we have the same choice about our fishing communities. I am not saying that we should not save them. On the whole, I am inclined to use these instruments to rationalise the industry because it needs to rationalise and to become less fragmented and more capital intensive. That would work for the consumer and for the industry itself. But there is a choice; that is my point.

Individual transferable quotas have interested me for some time. I weigh them, not against some abstract, perfect system but against the realistic alternatives, on the assumption that the current system is probably failing all six tests on which I elaborated earlier. What can the ITQ system do according to the experiences that we observed elsewhere? It looks as though it could deliver an economically successful fishery. I accept that the fisheries in which it is practised are different to those in the United Kingdom—our fisheries are more mixed and foreign ports are closer. I do not pretend that there is an exact parallel, but I am making certain arguments from which we can draw. Moreover, the system appears to curb the incentive to maximise the catch at the expense of the stock; ultimately, if the stock suffers, the balance sheet suffers, too. Clearly, the system also cuts public expenditure.

Could we therefore make ITQs cope with the social criteria that we might want to bring to the argument—that is, the maintenance of fishing communities? I believe that we could if we wanted to, but it would depend on how we made it work. In Iceland, for example, they prevented 100 per cent. leasing, vessels were obliged to fish part of their quota and there was a separate regime for smaller vessels. We could make the quota tradeable only at the level of the producer organisation—by and large, that is the current practice—rather than at an individual level. In the UK, people do buy it individually, but it then tends to be exploited by the person who brought the quota in. There is a mechanism by which we can make it a common rather than an individual resource, so long as we are careful that we do not build producer organisations into a modern version of ancient guilds, which themselves became monopoly dominant and sometimes abusive organisations.

We could also tax for transfers. Just as a sheep transfer or an agricultural quota is taxed, so we could tax a transfer in fisheries to raise resources that would go, for example, to new entrants or for a social purpose. There is nothing about an ITQ that could not be amended to meet the social criteria of our requirements. Enforcement is always a problem. Of course, foreign ports are close, but we could use modern technology, which is a large part of all our lives. Given the size of the fishing industry, which even across Europe is tiny, the technology must be available to develop a harmonised system to allow the instant communication of information between ports of landing. If we cannot do that, we are not being effective.

My approach to the report is not to lay down a perfect system to replace an arrangement that is not working, but to recognise the steady movement towards the introduction of market forces, most notably in the pelagic sector, but also in the purchasing of quota by producer organisations. Market forces have an extensive role throughout the United Kingdom. The Government recognise that and have regularised them to some extent. However, they could take other steps to make ownership a more absolute transfer. We are pushing not against a closed door, but against a door that has been opened informally.

I do not ask the Government to accept market forces in their entirety, but ask them to consider whether it is time to re-examine the concept against the criteria of a sustainable fishery, a reasonable use of a reasonable amount of public funding and a need to maintain a modern industry. We could usefully transpose the lessons from that into our system. The Minister should do that; there is no point waiting for the whole world to agree that it is a good idea. If he takes the leadership and decides what the progressive side of the industry is likely to be able to make work, the Committee will have done a service and the Minister will reinforce his reputation for reasonableness.

4.11 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): May I start with a debating point? The former Fisheries Minister, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry),

[Mr. Alex Salmond]

and I have never agreed on individual transferable quotas; I dare say that we never will. They have been tried around the world and, in almost every case, have put a huge concentration of fishing power into very few hands and destroyed fishing communities.

As for pelagic fishing, I do not agree that there is a choice between fishing communities and market forces. Let us consider the pelagic fleets south and north of the border. The English pelagic fleet consists of two freezer trawlers that are owned by Dutch interests; they are flagged-out boats. The Scottish pelagic fleet consists of 50 tank boats that fish productively and efficiently for a resource that is not under substantial pressure and is fished within quota according to a sustainable position. The only major difficulty that faces that catching sector is a regulation difficulty on the matter of engine size. There is no problem with resources or the efficiency of the fleet; there is only an administrative difficulty with engine size.

The Minister knows that I hold him in the highest regard. We had a productive meeting in Glasgow earlier this year and I thought that we were making substantial progress. However, the fishing industry would never forgive him were he to allow the determination of some of his over-zealous officials in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to bring about a situation in which the Scottish pelagic fleet went the same way as the English pelagic fleet or large sections of the English white fleet. When we sat on the Opposition Benches, he and I protested many times about how much of the English white fleet was flagged out. Fishing communities in Scotland depend on our pelagic fleet. We want it to continue in its present form and not change into something that is very different.

I give three welcomes. The first is to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your much deserved elevation to the position of Deputy Speaker, although I hope that that is not an attempt to silence one of the few truly independent voices left in the House of Commons.

My second welcome is to the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), who has been appointed to the Conservative Front Bench. When we served on the Energy Committee 10 years ago, I realised immediately that he was a future Conservative fisheries spokesperson. He is a vast improvement on his recent predecessor, though not, obviously, on all former Conservative fisheries spokesmen. None the less, I welcome him to his position.

Thirdly, I welcome an innovation—the provision of spring water to hon. Members. Conservative Members have correctly identified it as being Campsie Fells spring water from Lennoxtown, which makes it especially welcome. Water is not generally available in the main Chamber—Front Benchers get rather bad tap water that I would not touch with a bargepole—so I welcome that innovation.

I do not welcome the innovation of the Chamber—[HON. MEMBERS: "Shame."]—and I shall explain why. If the Select Committee on Agriculture produces an excellent report on the fishing industry, it should have an opportunity to debate the report in the main Chamber so that the report's excellence and its positions can be broadcast to a wider audience of Members of Parliament and, we hope, of the public. There is a great danger in the adopted procedure. With great respect to Select Committee members, we effectively represent the Select Committee in session plus only one or two interlopers, such as me; a meeting might have been sought with the Minister instead.

The fishing industry deserves debates in the main Chamber. With that in mind, I await the annual fisheries debate a week on Monday. I note with great regret that, yet again, it is to be a half-day debate. I recall that the Minister and I made a point on that matter at length when we were both in opposition. I even recall a commitment from him about the time that would be allocated to that annual debate.

Mr. Morley: I confess that I can confirm that, but the hon. Gentleman will remember one annual debate that was squeezed into one and a half hours, which was not acceptable. He will confirm that that has not happened under this Government.

Mr. Salmond: If we are considering the difference between one and a half hours and three hours, I note and accept the improvement. Some hon. Members who represent fishing constituencies would welcome the industry's being given the debating time that it deserves. The question is one of priority.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Does the hon. Gentleman take the Minister's comment as an assurance from the Government that there will be no statement on that Monday to take time from that debate?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have been indulgent, but it might be helpful if we returned to the main debate.

Mr. Salmond: Having praised your elevation, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am hardly likely to disobey such a sensible ruling; I shall not be tempted on that point. The question is one of priority in the fishing industry.

I found myself agreeing with much of what the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) said, which is a worrying development. I hope that my fishing constituents will understand. I note that much of his speech concerned the priority given to the industry. I greatly welcome the fact that he, after a long career in which he has made speeches in fishing debates, has reached a conclusion that I have made in every fisheries debate in which I have participated. The question of the priority allocated to the industry is central to fisheries policy, whether that policy is within the context of the common fisheries policy or any other area. The key contrast between the fisheries policy pursued by the United Kingdom and that pursued by other nations within the European Union has been the different allocation of priority to the industry. Three hours, or even a full day, of debate might be small compared to the priority allocated to the industry.

Hon. Members will be aware that the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament is one issue covered by the Committee's report. However, there is European Union involvement in several areas and, even where there is such involvement, decisions are taken by United

Kingdom Ministers. I wish to focus on two main areas and to consider more generally fishing policy and the future of the common fisheries policy.

First, as has been said, the report focuses substantially on the relationship between scientists and the fishing industry. I agreed on that point with many of the remarks made by the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ). I underline what she said about communication—there is distrust, a breakdown of communication and suspicion. I am sure that the Minister is aware that there are concerns in the industry about the extent and timing of fisheries' input into the science. I understand that this year the fishing federations were involved in consultation only two weeks before the scientists began preparing their total allowable catch recommendations. Furthermore, the industry feels that the science does not take adequate account of effort reduction measures—for example, the large number of white fish boats now involved in the prawn fishery. In the case of the haddock quota, the sicence is based on over-quota catches of 20 per cent., but the industry would argue that the reality is somewhat different. That concern will certainly be ventilated during the debte that will take place a week on Monday.

For a long time the industry has been calling for a standing committee of fishermen and scientists so that discussion and involvement in the preparation of scientific advice can be an on-going process whereby there can be fishing involvement in the analysis and preparation of the science starting from day one. Such a move would build confidence in the scientific advice and, more importantly, produce science that more accurately reflects the realities in our fisheries. It would also mean that quota allocations do not come as such a surprise to the industry, and that they are not left with too little time to press for further investigation into areas where they feel that the scientific advice is deficient or flawed.

It would also allow the industry to highlight the steps that could be taken to allow greater or higher quota levels. For many years, the Minister and I have argued that technical conservation measures could allow higher quota levels if they could be taken into account in terms of the TAC. Clearly, if that discussion does not take place on an organised basis from year to year, it can never be incorporated into a proper estimate of fisheries effort. That argument is regularly presented during the annual fisheries debate and by the industry. Paragraph 49 of the Committee's report calls for a more formalised and permanent approach and, in their response, the Government agree. However, there does not yet seem to be a firm commitment to the creation of a meaningful structure for that consultation. I hope that the Minister can give us some comfort in respect of full involvement, early consultation and a committee linking scientists and the industry in the preparation of scientific advice.

Secondly, I noticed with interest the recommendation in the Government's response regarding the issue of fishing safety grants. The Committee called for the reinstatement of the vessel equipment safety guard scheme. However, I understand that the Government have indicated in a letter to the industry in England that that is not possible because of "devolution and legal technicalities".

Mr. Mitchell: It is Scotland's fault.

Mr. Salmond: I am used to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby attempting to intervene on me.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We are all delighted by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, but if he intends to make interventions they should not be from a sedentary position.

Mr. Salmond: I know that the hon. Gentleman will have taken careful note of that, Madam Deputy Speaker. You may be the first person in the Chair to be able to keep him fully under control.

My understanding is that money is available to reintroduce the scheme in Scotland, but not in England. I am concerned, unlike the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, that Scotland might be held back because of problems facing the English Department. I would be grateful if the Minister would explain what is the problem in terms of reinstating the grant, what discussions he has had with the Scottish Minister for fisheries on this issue, and what involvement he has had in reintroducing the grant.

The Minister will be aware of the wider debate that is raging about whether Westminster Departments are engaged in a desperate attempt to retain control over areas that are properly the province of the Scottish Parliament through ministerial committees, as they seem to have ended up in the chair of every such ministerial committee. I am sure that the Fisheries Minister would not chair such a committee and hold back the Scottish Department if it wanted to reintroduce safety guards, because that is a vital issue.

I hope that the Minister will confirm that he accepts that there is a relationship between the age of the fleet and the safety issue. I know that that relationship has been challenged in the past. None the less, those of us who have experience of representing fishing communities believe that that link exists. We are deeply worried about the ageing structure of the fleet, given that younger skippers are going to ever more distant waters and, under pressure of economic circumstances, going out in ever more difficult conditions. I hope that the Minister will accept that and tell us some good news about the reintroduction of the safety grant regime, which was supported by the Committee.

The Minister is also aware of the increased compliance costs facing the industry and of the fact that the costs borne by our fleet are often not borne by the industry in other EU countries. He knows that that is inequitable and that he made a variety of commitments on that—it was one of his strongest points during his years as Opposition spokesman. He is aware of the concern about the introduction of new safety requirements for the under 12 m fleet. The industry wants safety grants to be reintroduced to assist that sector of the fleet to meet the new requirements. It is wrong to suggest that there is no link between safety at sea and safety grants and I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us on that.

[Mr. Salmond]

With review of the common fisheries policy in 2002, time is short. We must press our solutions to the problem of the common fisheries policy. That means coastal state management of the fisheries—a cause that my late colleague, Dr. Allan Macartney, argued with such vigour in the European Parliament and with considerable success in its fisheries committee. It also means greater account being taken of discards and the promotion of technical measures to work hand in hand with other schemes to protect Scots—[*Laughter.*] Scots need a lot of protection from a variety of Ministers in this Parliament, but not, I hope, from this Minister. Stocks need protection and that should be taken into account in the calculation of effort reduction for the multi-annual guidance programme targets.

I was encouraged recently to hear that Commissioner Fischler had said that he could not envisage a common fisheries policy without relative stability. In his discussions with the Commissioner, I hope that the Minister will confirm that the review of the common fisheries policy will take that direction because it is of substantial importance to our position north and south of the border.

Those are the challenges for the Minister. I hope that he will not take personal offence when I say that I do not want him to be the lead Minister in European negotiations, not because of his personal qualities, which are substantial, but because the Minister who speaks for two thirds of the fleet, or should do—the Scottish Minister—should be the lead Minister in European negotiations. While the Fisheries Minister holds the position of lead Minister at European level, I believe that he will fight for our fishing industry north and south of the border and hope that he will satisfy the Committee on the points that I have raised.

4.27 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I, too, welcome you to your new position, Madam Deputy Speaker. There must be something special about the west coast main line because Madam Speaker's constituency, which is close to Birmingham, can be reached by the west coast main line, as can yours. Those of us who travel on that train will expect a new discipline as a result of your promotion.

I was not a member of the Agriculture Committee while it carried out its investigation, but I joined it just as it had reached its conclusions. I do not feel bound to follow its recommendations, but will make some observations about its findings. My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) and I are previous Fisheries Ministers and bear the scars of that office. We held our responsibilities at a time when the industry was under pressure to restrict fishing effort and to adapt to changes in the common fisheries policy to allow the full introduction of Spain and Portugal to their treaty-given and rightful positions as full members of the common fisheries policy.

When the industry is fighting for its survival and what it believes to be threats against it, one sees it at its best and its worst. It is an industry of great passion and anyone who has had any connection with it knows that it is unlike any other. It is the very life blood of the individuals and communities that serve it. When someone has been involved with the industry, it is very difficult to give up being interested in it. It has its own committed fan club, although it may be painful for Ministers to be members of that club.

I concur with much of what has been said about the relationship between fishermen and scientists, and the report comments properly on that. Two years ago, as a Front-Bench spokesman for my party, I took part in a debate on fishing. I, too, made the point that a council of fishermen and scientists should be formed to achieve the objectives that have been outlined. As we reach the end of the 20th century and the start of the new millennium, I am disappointed that such a forum has yet to be created. At a fundamental level, the industry finds it difficult to believe in scientific findings, particularly given that it has not been involved in the process, and findings on fish stocks are constraining fishermen.

When discussing the question of regulating fishing, I am mindful of what happened in the waters of Newfoundland, where a cod fishery that could sustain a catch of 300,000 tonnes a year and some 58,000 jobs was reduced to a barren sea within a very short time through over-fishing and a wholly unregulated regime. We need rules and regulations to constrain not merely, as the report states, fishermen's natural desire to enter a race for fish, but their desire to win that race time after time. Given the prevalence of modern technology, fish are significantly disadvantaged in the battle with man the catcher. A visit to a modern trawler shows that computerised techniques are increasing the precision with which fishermen operate. Once fish are located, they become involved in an unequal battle.

I was somewhat saddened by one of the report's general findings. It comments with authority and clarity on the current regime embodied in the common fisheries policy, but there is little evidence of new thinking. The question of bringing fishermen and the rule makers together in a real partnership is not addressed. My hon. friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon and others have talked about ownership. In that context, the concept of the fisherman as farmer is an interesting one to explore. One cannot see the fisherman as a farmer, because he cannot think carefully about which parts of the ocean to exploit, when to exploit them, and which to leave fallow, if he has little control over his work.

Although the report did not deal with the future of the common fisheries policy, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) was right to raise questions about its reform. The common fisheries policy sets the report's boundaries and constraints. If we do not think radically about the way in which the common fisheries policy is formulated, so that fishermen are involved with the rule makers—be they national Governments, the commission, or any other body—in a true partnership, we will not generate the responsibilty in the industry that we advocate in the report.

I suggest that we should put forward a model scheme for the Irish sea. In the first instance, the Governments of England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland should get together with fishermen and their representatives to form a council for the Irish sea, and formulate a management plan. In the context of the common fisheries policy, such a plan would then be put to the Fisheries Council for endorsement. The same model could apply to other designated waters. Unless

the fishing industry and Governments are brought together in a true partnership, all the wonderful science in the world will not prevent fishermen from railing against sudden and dramatic quota cuts, which will inevitably occur in the round for which the Minister is preparing. Instead of continual dialogue, scientists will arrive, MAFF officials will sit in a little room in Brussels with their computer, decisions will be made on whether the quotas can go up a bit or down a bit, the Council will meet, someone will give something away, swaps will be done and, magically, with a combination of science, political horse trading and general wheeler-dealing, the quotas will emerge. Those who are the winners will love them, and those who are the losers will have total distaste for them, without any real consideration of the impact on the spawning stock biomass, which is the seedcorn of the fishing industry.

I would have liked the report to say a little more about the tools and methods for determining when a stock is under pressure and in danger. The scientists have become clever; they know that the politicians will magically water down the numbers, or the warnings, when fishing quantity is discussed. The fishermen are somehow not involved in that argument. The only way of finding a better basis on which to judge the threat to stocks is better definition of when stocks are under pressure. It is not necessary to be a genius to realise how the pressure on stocks has grown. The extremely high cod stocks in 1945 were the most telling example of that. There was a rapid decline in those stocks as fishing effort increased after the derelict years of the war. Currently, stocks seem to be up one year and down the next. We need a better definition of when stocks are under pressure and we need the industry to believe and respect scientists who say, "Enough is enough".

The report considers the question of reducing fishing effort. It states:

"We recommend that the Government fully support any proposals for stronger sanctions on Member States to ensure compliance with MAGP targets and for greater transparency as to the cost of restructuring".

That is almost in the realms of apple pie and motherhood. We all want to raise the targets, but there are grave difficulties in persuading the industry to reduce fishing effort. My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon still bears the scars from his efforts in that respect.

Mr. Mitchell: The industry does.

Mr. Jack: The hon. Gentleman says that the industry does, but the industry has always been reluctant, unless there is a little oil of decommissioning between the wheels, to indulge in any effort reduction. Perhaps a better marketplace for the buying and selling of quotas will help naturally to reduce industry effort. The only way out is to sell fishermen's economic assets. Unless that mechanism is allowed to work and develop, I cannot see more public funds becoming available for further decommissioning activities.

It is vital to recognise the special nature of the fishing industry to those communities that are dependent on it. One question that has not been mentioned much in this debate—the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) mentioned it en passant—is the marketing of fish and the state of fish markets. It is important to maintain high quality fish markets in this country, as only 25 per cent. of the fish sold in this country comes from our own catches. A substantial import industry exists, and anyone who wants to understand the nature of modern fish sales needs only to go to Billingsgate market to see that there is a varied offering of fish, including fruit-eating piranha, which clearly do not come from any of the seas around the United Kingdom. The marketing and sale of fish have taken on a new dimension—there is new interest and a strong public following. However, imported fish stocks are worth about £1 billion and are double the value of the catch from UK fishermen. Fishing is a small industry, but for the communities that depend on it, it is disproportionately important.

Fishing News is an interesting newspaper. The first half of the paper is a commentary of despair—it details all the bad bits in the industry and all the complaints, and it follows the debate on the future of the common fisheries policy. If one read only the front part of the newspaper, one would think that fishing as we knew it was about to go out of existence. However, when one reaches the centre section and the second part, a wholly different industry emerges—one of new investment, new techniques and new equipment. Those sections give a remarkably positive view of the industry. One could read the newspaper from the back, as the Chinese do, in which case one would begin in positive mode, but if one started from the front, one would be deeply disappointed. The one clear message—which I am sure would have been endorsed by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan, if he had been in his place—is that the Scottish industry is, in economic terms, of growing and considerable importance. That is where most of the new investment is occurring. The health and strength of the pelagic fleet are major contributors in that regard.

There are important lessons to learn from the debate about the future of Britain's fishing policy. By and large, the Scottish industry has resolved to accept that its rule-making body will be the European Union in the context of the common fisheries policy. There will be a great opportunity in 2002 to consider those changes, and I hope that in a future report the Agriculture Committee will revisit territory that it perhaps wisely eschewed in this report. The CFP mechanism, which determines the rules under which fishermen have to work, is designed to sustain fisheries. The rules will be better respected if scientists and fishermen have a common purpose. Mechanisms such as the one that I described are needed to create a real, meaningful and working partnership of fishermen, Governments and others, and ensure that the industry operates to the benefit of all.

4.42 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I join those who have welcomed you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to your new position. It is another staging post in a very distinguished career.

I also thank the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), who has not remained in this Chamber to hear what I have to say, for the welcome that he afforded to me, and the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George), for his welcome. I fear that I must disappont the hon. Member for St. Ives—I shall not, on this occasion, go into the details of our policy. We are

[Mr. Malcolm Moss]

discussing the report, which specifically rules out any reference to the common fisheries policy and its mechanisms. I shall restrict my comments to the report and the Government's response to it.

The report contains no meaningful references to the CFP. I am new to my brief—I had seven days to mug up on the CFP and the Agriculture Committee's report—and I am mindful of the fact that two distinguished former Ministers are sitting behind me. Facing me—or perhaps I should say around the corner from where I am speaking—is a distinguished Minister who has spent about nine years—

Mr. Morley: Ten.

Mr. Moss: The Minister spent 10 years as the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson with responsibilities for fishing and he has spent two years as Minister. I have a rather daunting task ahead of me.

When I read the report, the first thing that puzzled me was the fact that neither its terms of reference nor its conclusion refer to the crucial distinction between the industry that depends on the six to 12-mile limit and that which depends on the waters beyond it, which I call the offshore waters. Bearing in mind the crucial date of 31 December 2002 which looms ahead of the Government, I would have expected more analysis from the Committee on the prospects of the industry. The fact that the Committee did not tackle the CFP gave it some problems. Even the Government's response to the report alluded to that fact, albeit obliquely, in saying that there were constraints on the scope for drawing up a UK strategy and citing in particular our obligations under the CFP.

However, despite those limitations, it is a good in-depth report. I agree with the Select Committee's Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), that it presents a positive image of the fishing industry. From the little time that I have had in which to consult, I understand that it has been widely accepted by those in the industry. It investigates issues that I believe were important. However, it was put to me by someone in the industry that it would have been more helpful had the Government been in a position to exercise proper and total control over the fishing industry.

The Committee's report sets out some clear-cut objectives and aims, and says of them:

"These depend upon the Government first deciding on the type of industry it wishes to see and the level of intervention it wishes to retain."

Surely this relates only to the six to 12-mile limits to which I alluded. Elsewhere, the UK Government have precious little influence over decisions made by Brussels. The Committee has not been assiduous enough in probing the limits. In paragraph 154 of the report, the Committee quotes the concerns of the Association of Sea Fisheries Committees of England and Wales over the limits, stating that

"the ASFC in particular was concerned that 'unless and until they are permanently established under national control then the future for the coastal fishing industry will continue to be uncertain.'"

Later in the report, the Committee accepted reassurances from the Commission that CFP regulation 3760/92 was under no real threat. That is reflected in recommendation 48. In the Government's response, they speak of a commitment to retaining the six to 12 mile limits, yet nowhere in that document—or anywhere in print—is there a guarantee that they will continue.

The report also states:

"our overriding concern is that the Government establish a settled, transparent long-term strategy for management of fisheries"

How can the Government do that? Their response did not address certain key problems, one of which is the fact that new member states have joined, and will continue to join, the European Union.

Regulations agreed in 1994—special fishing permits—give the Community the power to control all aspects of EU fishing. In the accession treaties of Austria, Finland and Sweden, it is laid down that those permits must be in operation by the end of 2002. How will that leave us at the end of that year, with the derogation ending at the same time? How are the permits to be introduced? What effect will they have on existing licences and/or quotas? Will they apply to derogated coastal zones, if those are extended at that time? These questions may lie outside the scope of this report, but the Government failed to allude to them in their response to what the Committee said was its "overriding concern".

Page iv of the Government's response concerns their broad objectives for improving the common fisheries policy. It alludes to an objective of

"integrating environmental considerations more fully into the CFP to make it a more effective instrument for the conservation of fish stocks".

I believe that some new measures are to be introduced from 1 January 2000 and I know that in his deliberations the Minister has fought for significant changes, particularly on mesh sizes; unfortunately, he did not win that particular battle. As I look through the records, I wonder how many of our Ministers ever did win any battles.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) noted that some of these excellent rules are not implemented because of the problems of harmonisation and the mesh size measure was one of those that fell. Instead of it, the Commission seems to have introduced lower minimum landing sizes for hake, megrim and plaice, which the Government have put into thier objectives. How on earth can the Commission think that lowering minimum fish sizes is in any way a conservation measure? Should there not be a rule not to take any fish smaller than the necessary size for each species to breed at least once? Does the Minister still hold the view that he put to the Council, or does he believe that reducing minimum landing sizes is a conservation measure? Perhaps it is simply a concession to the southern countries which, as we all know, have a ready market for under-sized fish.

A little later in their response, the Government talk about

"increasing the regional dimension of the CFP so that it is more sensitive to local differences."

What does that mean? In the minutes of the Committee's oral examination of the Minister, the hon. Member for St. Ives honed in on that very point. When he asked whether

"some delegation to zonal management is a realistic prospect",

the Minister said:

"But, before we actually get down to, if you like, the nuts and bolts of how it would work, there are some key issues to resolve, and one of the key issues is the definition of both regional and zonal management, because it means different things to different people, different countries and different parts of the industry. So, before we even start to make much progress on this, we need to resolve that particular issue. But we are giving thought to that at the present time."

That is very reassuring, but as no definition is available it hardly seems to meet the requirements of a policy statement.

A number of hon. Members alluded to safety at sea grants. The real question is why MAFF thought it necessary to take them away in the first place. There is some inconsistency in the statements from MAFF and those made by the Deputy Prime Minister.

Under the heading "Licences and quota", recommendation 21 of the report states:

"We recommend that MAFF provide clear guidance on the legal title to licences and quota in the context of transactions between individuals and/or organisations".

We all know that there is no legal title to quota, but the Government should have pointed that out in their response. Instead, they said:

"There are no plans to change the existing position whereby licences and quotas apply at the discretion of Ministers but with fishermen's interests protected by the legal concept of legitimate expectation."

What does that mean? What is a "legitimate expectation"? Why did not the Committee probe that further? It is meaningless. In fact, we were recently told that a Scottish Minister with responsibility for fisheries told fishermen in Scotland that they could not count on quotas because they were unreliable. He gave the example of potato quotas. Why is a Minister pointing out the problems of transferring quotas if he does not intend keeping them in some form?

The section on no-take zones is important. The Government agree that more should be done about them. There are 500 m exclusion zones around our oil rigs in the North sea. I am told that the sea under the oil rigs is teeming with fish to such an extent that it is impossible to lower the cameras to see what is happening at the base of the rig. Instead, divers have to go down and swim through the fish. If that works so well, why not extend the zone to 1,000 m?

Recommendation 26 on the non-profit sale of over-quota fish alludes to a model in Iceland. I have been told that we should not adopt that model because a significant quantity of fish, in particular cod, is dumped even though the system is designed to prevent such discarding.

As for discards, which are dealt with in recommendation 27, the Committee asked

"MAFF to consider measures to reduce discards through a more flexible quota management and that it continue to promote within Europe the use of more selective fishing gear".

That is all very well, but it takes years to implement such changes. It took six years for the square mesh panel for prawn fisheries to be adopted. That modest change was introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) in, I think, 1993. It took another six years to implement it in Europe and it is predicted that it will be another six years before the square mesh panel is adopted for white fish. There is little point in saying in a document that this is a practical policy for the immediate future because it takes so long to make changes.

I had to laugh at the part of the Government's response where they said:

"Also, it must be borne in mind that a high proportion of discards are due to undersized fish being caught."

Talk about stating the obvious! The Government's response on discards is weak. It is no wonder that the industry is frustrated because changes, which take years to implement, could be made that would make a phenomenal difference to problems such as discard.

The Government speak about new technical conservation measures that

"are designed to make fishing gears more selective".

That is news to the industry. What are the new measures? What "fishing gears" is the response referring to? What impact will the changes have on the volume of discard? There is no evidence in support of the Government's response.

On balance, this is a good report and it has brought me up to speed in a short time. It is wide ranging and goes into problems in reasonable depth. I commend the Chairman and the Committee on an excellent report.

4.58 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): May I also start by congratulating you on your new post, Madam Deputy Speaker? Having served on many Committees with you, both in opposition and in government, I think that it is a well-deserved appointment. I also welcome the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) to his new position, although much of what he said went beyond the remit of the report. I will be happy to discuss wider issues in the annual fisheries debate.

I am glad that the hon. Gentleman said that it is self-evident that discarded fish are predominantly undersized and immature. I say that because, although that was not the view of his immediate predecessor, it is the basis of my argument.

I welcome the report, which provides an example of a Select Committee doing an excellent job in scrutinising the Executive. We should not forget that that is part of its role. I am therefore pleased to respond to the report both as a Minister on behalf of my Department and in the sense that I am keen to keep in touch with the Committee in relation to new developments and answering questions.

In the spirit of the format of this new Chamber, I have not come along with a Ministry-prepared speech. I have listened to what hon. Members have said during the debate and intend to base my responses precisely on the matters that have been raised. I will, of course, allude to what has been said in relation to the Government's formal response to the report. I hope that I am not making my officials too nervous.

[Mr. Elliot Morley]

I welcome the positive thrust of the Committee's report, which has been mentioned by several members of the Committee who have spoken today, because there is much to be positive about in the UK fishing industry. Of course there are problems and difficulties, and some sectors of the industry feel that they have got a bad deal. However, there is also a great deal of innovation and success, and many sectors of the industry are doing very well. The report highlights that fact.

It is worth stressing that the report approaches the whole issue of fisheries management in a mature and sensible way. I wish that some sectors of the industry would do the same. I do not get up in the morning and say, "How can I annoy the fishing industry today? How can I reduce its quota? Let's find a new rule that will make fishermen really mad." I, my officials and the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science do not take that approach, although I know that the phrase "I'm from MAFF and I'm here to help you" has fishermen rolling in the aisles. We are trying to help the fishing industry. We are trying to look to the long term, introduce sustainability and address the industry's problems. Some of the answers to those problems are not easy, and sometimes they are not the ones that the industry wants to hear. I shall return to that in a moment.

The report is a class act. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) has a detailed knowledge of the fishing industry and is a great champion of it. He is also prepared to recognise that the industry has problems and faults, and is not afraid to say so and deal with the implications.

The hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) is knowledgeable about the fishing industry in general and the south-west fishing industry in particular, which is an issue in itself. He is very perceptive, and has been honest in his approach. As he said, an honest approach sometimes attracts criticism because people do not always want to hear the truth. That is one of the problems in fisheries management.

Having said all that, I must express a mild criticism. As an avid reader of provincial newspapers, I read *The Western Morning News*—although it is not generally good for my blood pressure—and I noticed that the hon. Member for St. Ives had criticised me for telling the industry about the quota cuts too soon. He suggested that they should have been discussed behind closed doors before we spoke to the industry. I should point out to him that we are trying to give the industry the information that it wants as early as we possibly can.

Mr. Andrew George: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I particularly wanted to hear him amplify his point about transparent long-term policies for the industry, and I hope that he is coming to that. As for *The Western Morning News*, I am afraid that I cannot answer for the way in which local journalists report what I say. I do not remember having made such a comment.

Mr. Morley: Having had experience of *The Western Morning News* for many years, I can accept the hon. Gentleman's point. However, I shall have to redraft the article that I am writing for it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) stressed consumerism and the fact that the ultimate issue is one of providing for markets of various kinds and qualities. She also referred to confidence in scientists, to which I shall return.

The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), a former Minister with responsibility for fisheries, knows the industry very well. Indeed, in that capacity, he tackled many of these issues in a fair and sensible way. He has raised a number of detailed points, which I shall deal with in due course.

Like me, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond)—the leader of the Scottish National party—has occupied his current post for a very long time. He and I have debated these issues for many years, and seen many changes in the industry, and I shall deal with the points that he raised.

The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), another former Minister with responsibility for fisheries, made some good points, particularly in relation to regional management and the Irish sea. Such knowledgeable people have added to the quality of our debate on the fishing industry. His thoughts on the Irish sea, which he has raised before, are interesting, and I have discussed them with officials as part of the regional approach that we would like to develop. In that respect, his comments were positive and constructive.

Some of the report's recommendations are being acted on and some will be acted on. We are studying others, and none will be ignored. Of course, I accept that the common fisheries policy is not perfect. This is not a debate about reform of the CFP, but the Committee may consider that as we approach 2002.

The report did not consider the CFP because a single report cannot consider both the industry's management and the CFP's structures. We are looking at regional management issues, and talking to the Commission. The new commissioner, Franz Fischler, has taken a constructive view on fisheries issues. Some of his statements have been very encouraging.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan raised the subject of relative stability. We believe that relative stability will remain post-2002. It is an important part of fisheries management, and is certainly one of the Government's objectives. Similarly, I am confident that existing coastal limits will remain post-2002. They are in the interests of our country and other countries. I am aware of no other member state that holds a different opinion. As a Minister, making predictions is risky, but I am confident that progress can be made.

With regard to quotas, it is trust that many stocks are in poor shape. There is also the important issue of science and confidence in scientists, which was raised by a number of Select Committee members. We are taking steps to act on the Committee's recommendations, which are sensible and practical. The industry needs to become more involved in what we are doing, and that process has begun. We arranged for the chairman of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations to sail on the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science research ship. I believe that he spent five days on that vessel, and found it very useful. I understand that he played an important role: he gained practical experience and even repaired the nets. He enjoyed the exercise and found it useful, as did CEFAS.

I should correct the impression that scientists talk to the industry only at the end of the year. They visit ports throughout the year, and keep in touch with the industry. As a result of the Committee's recommendations, we have arranged meetings between the fishing industry and CEFAS scientists, which have proved very useful. However, I accept that there is more work to be done. As was said, we need to involve the industry at an earlier point, and perhaps in a more formal way. Recently, I had a number of meetings with scientists and the industry prior to the quota negotiations. It would be useful to begin contacts between scientists and fishermen in January, which would enable us to formalise and prepare the process. I assure the Select Committee that we shall try to improve on what we have done towards accepting its recommendations. That is sensible and the best way forward. On the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean, the tenders for the new fisheries research ship will go out within weeks. I do not know whether that can be brought further forward, in view of the building process. I understand that British shipyards have submitted tenders, and I hope that they are successful.

I support multi-species modelling. Although it is complex, it is the way forward for stock calculations. It will be seriously addressed. Hon. Members stressed our competitive position, which is important. On the issue of the overall regulatory burden, controls and regulations are necessary. However, streamlining and simplification would take some pressure off the industry. The advent of satellite monitoring, for example, might allow us to review regulations such as the two-licence rule.

We are keen on uniform enforcement, and I was interested in the idea of using overseas posts. We receive reports from overseas posts about trends in different industries, and I accept that we could make further use of them. If I may digress, we intend to make extensive use of overseas posts to recapture beef markets. We shall consider how to use overseas posts to collect information on enforcement and costs.

A point was made on the legal title of quotas. Following the Select Committee's recommendation, we started discussions with the industry on how to formalise the issue of quotas. I am reluctant to concede the issue of legal titles, because I do not want to concede management flexibility. However, many fishermen and producer organisations have invested a great deal of money in quotas, which is the right thing to do. One way of removing the threats to regions is collective, co-operative ownership of quota within producer organisations. I do not want to undermine such investment.

We need to consider security issues in relation to the Ministry, which holds the title to the quotas, and year-to-year management. Stocks change from year to year—people do not buy a stock, but buy a share of a stock—and the overall total allowable catch alters. A meeting with the industry took place on 14 October, and proposals were made for a joint industry-Ministry working group to discuss the issue further.

The issue of concordats was mentioned. As the Chairman of the Select Committee said, concordats have been published. We are establishing sensible and close working relationships with the Scottish Executive. My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) is doing an excellent job—I could not hope for a Minister with better knowledge of the industry—and he is working with us to obtain the best deal for the UK industry, including the Scottish industry. He has already spoken in the Fisheries Council, where he has taken the lead for the UK, especially on issues of interest to Scotland. We are working closely together, and that has strengthened our position.

Safety grants have been discussed in detail. Clearly, the financing of safety grants is an issue for the Scottish Executive, and I do not have the necessary knowledge to comment on that. I am not aware of any stance taken by MAFF that is difficult for the Scottish Executive. I shall refer to safety grants in a moment.

Mr. Salmond: Will the Minister clarify "devolution and legal technicalities"? It was claimed in the letter to the industry that that was an obstacle to the reintroduction of safety grants.

Mr. Morley: Yes. I can clarify that and will do so when I speak about safety grants.

We must examine competitiveness, but people sometimes refer to competing with other member states for fish. That is not competition because we have our national quota and we do not compete with other countries for that. There is competition in the overall cost of getting fish to port and to market, but we must examine the total cost figure. That includes lower business taxes in the United Kingdom compared with many of our European competitors and other cost advantages. I am not complacent about that matter and other issues must be considered, such as the waste water directive. MAFF made representations to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on the directive's potential effects on the fishing industry.

New build is another issue, and age and safety are important. Analysis of the figures does not show clearly whether there is a clear correlation between the age of a vessel and safety. However, the matter is being considered and a new report has been produced recently by the Sea Fishing Industry Authority. We shall examine the figures because safety is a serious matter.

I do not believe that grants for new build are in the interests of the industry. A number of hon. Members have referred to increasing efforts and the problem of constantly trying to manage a fishing industry that does not stand still. One example is the catch of North sea prawns by the under 10 m fleet, which has increased by 400 per cent. since last year. Our quota was exhausted in August and we managed to obtain some extra quota for the North sea fleet until September, but that was also exhausted and the prawn fishing industry had to be closed temporarily, which was not popular. I did not want to do that and nor did the Ministry, but we have a responsibility for managing stocks.

The stock of prawns is one of the few in the North sea that is in good shape. We made an application to obtain extra quota and in the meantime we have applied monthly catch limits, which seem to be working. One reason for the problem is that the industry has been profitable in the past couple of years. People have been investing in new boats without grants. Those new boats

[Mr. Morley]

have a greater catch capacity than old ones and that is the main reason why the prawn fishery in the North sea is in trouble. The Germans were very successful in the design of pocket battleships. Pocket trawlers—new under 10 m boats—are very efficient and result in increased effort.

Grant-aiding new boats might involve grant-aiding a vessel to such a specification that its catch could not be maintained. That would not be good for the industry because it would increase competition and put more pressure on stocks. The value of quota and licences varies according to the size of the vessel, but the range can be in millions of pounds. When people have assets of hundreds of thousands of pounds and possibly millions, the justification for providing public money for support is not strong.

I have discussed the matter with the industry and the banks, which have made it clear that they have no problem in providing finance for new boats. They believe that the returns in the industry are good at the moment and there has been a lot of investment around all our coasts, not just in Scotland. I am pleased about that, although I realise that some sections of the industry have had more difficulty.

It gave me no pleasure to see safety grants withdrawn. I am prepared to justify difficult decisions but, ideally, we should not have taken that decision if MAFF had been able to provide the necessary funds. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister gave an undertaking that the safety grants would be reinstated.

In response to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan, the difficulty with devolution did not so much involve establishing who had and who had not got money; rather, it involved a legal and technical difficulty. The grants were withdrawn and a new order would have been needed to reinstate them because the relevant provisions no longer applied to the UK.

We should also consider the fact that new structural funds will be introduced in the new year under Agenda 2000. Those funds offer an opportunity to reconsider safety grants and marketing and processing grants. Within the context of structural grants, they might also provide help with onshore installations and facilities. I am keen to secure that—

Mr. Salmond: I know that the Minister has further points to make, but this is an important issue. He discussed the technical difficulty with devolution and the fact that the scheme no longer applied to the UK. The Scottish Parliament is not going to go away. Will the technical difficulty be overcome, or will it frustrate the Minister and the rest of us for any length of time?

Mr. Morley: No. The issue will be one for the Scottish Parliament, but it must consider the issues raised by structural funds. Structural funds will be allocated to both the Scottish and the Westminster Parliaments. The funds will have Treasury implications for England and Wales and there will be financial implications for the Scottish Executive. Both Parliaments will have to resolve those issues.

Mr. Curry: Is the Minister saying that if an order had been made, it would have applied only to England? Does that mean that the English might have had their grant restored, but that the Scots might not unless they had taken action? If so, what would be wrong with that?

Mr. Morley: The situation, as I understand it, is that the order under which the grants operated no longer applied when devolution was introduced. To introduce new provisions would have meant introducing new orders. We are about to enter into new structural funds and we should perhaps consider the possibility of a new scheme. The majority of fishing vessels were not in the old safety grant scheme.

Mr. Salmond: I can speak for the main Opposition party in the Scottish Parliament and perhaps on behalf of the Opposition parties in the Westminster Parliament. There would be no difficulty, from the Opposition's point of view, if the orders had been laid in the Scottish and Westminster Parliaments, even if they would operate only in the short term and until the structural funds were introduced. What was the problem?

Mr. Morley: The problem was technical and the issue was that the income stream—the funding—from the MAFF had gone. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] I do not want to mislead the Chamber. The proposal was stopped because of insufficient money and MAFF could not reintroduce it. However, the technical issue was also involved and it was clear that it was better to consider the possibility of starting a new scheme next year with the introduction of the new structural funds. We should also consider how the scheme should operate. The old scheme was by no means perfect.

Mr. Salmond: The Minister brings us back to the start of my speech. I suggested that money was available in Scotland but not in Westminster, and that a Scottish order was not introduced because the Minister wanted the proposals to apply throughout the UK. Has not the Minister confirmed that that was the case?

Mr. Morley: Absolutely not. I was not aware that any money was available in Scotland for the continuation of the old scheme. In that respect, this is an issue for Scotland. So far as I am aware, if the old scheme had been reinstated, it would not have applied to Scotland. Technically, a new order could have been introduced, but the money would have had to be found—we did not have it in MAFF. I am not sure whether any money was available in Scotland.

The most sensible way to reintroduce the scheme would be to do so through the new structural funds and with a new scheme to arrange the funding. We are currently discussing the best way to take that forward, together with the marketing and processing grants and other important aspects.

Time does not permit me to cover the other sectors, including the pelagic sector. I am sorry about that, but hon. Members will have an opportunity to discuss those subjects during the annual debate if they wish. If hon. Members would like to write to me about points that they feel that I have not covered in my reply, I will be pleased to respond to them in detail.

In conclusion, this has been a very good debate. The report is excellent, and a great credit to all those who have been involved with it. I emphasise to the

Committee that we take it seriously and are looking at ways in which we can act to implement its recommendations.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Does the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) wish to speak again?

5.25 pm

Mr Luff: With the leave of hon. Members, Madam Deputy Speaker. I join other hon. Members in welcoming you to your new role. It is no doubt your presence in the Chair that has so inspired today's debate, which, as the Minister said, has been a fine one. I was remiss in not welcoming my hon.Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr.Moss) to his place as Opposition spokesman on these matters. I congratulate him on his inventiveness in finding issues to dispute in such a non-contentious report. However, I have a word of advice for him taken from my limited experience of the industry: to be careful to whom he speaks. It is easy to justify any prejudice if one speaks to the right individuals in the fishing industry. My advice is to take wide soundings.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell)—who explained why, sadly, he has had to leave the Room—was right to emphasise the need for the industry to up its game, as he put it. That is one of the report's key themes. I am pleased that we have not concentrated too much today on the difficulties and challenges, but rather considered the opportunities and ways in which the industry can seize them. However, I echo what the hon. Gentleman said about the waste water directive.

I was amused by the comments of the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) about the lack of comprehension between fishermen and politicians. I am beginning to think that we should have put a recommendation about that in the report. It was perhaps a sin of omission, to which theme I shall return later.

I was delighted by the comments of the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ). I had wanted to speak about marketing, but I knew that she intended to, and she said all the things that I would wish to have said. The development of new markets is crucial.

Every hon. Member who spoke highlighted the danger that is implicit in the lack of trust between fishermen and scientists. That was a major theme of the report, and the Minister clearly understands that.

I was pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) emphasised the difficulty of achieving consensus. He was right to say that on many tricky issues the Minister will have to lead rather than seek that consensus.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) is a welcome interloper. He emphasised the important point about the lack of priority that sometimes attaches to fishing. I have great sympathy with his frustration about safety grants in Scotland, which he discussed with the Minister. I had similar frustrations about the lifting of the beef on the bone ban in England, but we had to wait for Scotland. It seems to me that devolution means differentiation. If the hon. Gentleman cannot accept that, what does he think was the point of having devolution in the first place?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) criticised the report for sins of omission. He is allowed that luxury, not having been a signatory to it. I plead partly guilty to the charge. His comments about coastal and zonal management and his novel ideas for the Irish sea were absolutely right. However, they are implicitly covered by paragraphs 151 to 153. Similarly, his comments about research issues are covered by paragraphs 36 to 41.

I accept the main thrust of the criticism of the report by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire. However, I do not think that the six and 12-mile limits issue should detain the Committee. I agree with the Minister's judgment about the inevitability of protecting the 12-mile limit. My hon. Friend referred to the omission of some matters that we could have considered. The report was already a tad on the long side, however, and I should not have wanted to make it any longer.

I was hugely encouraged by the Minister's response—although I know that he has a habit of killing with kindness. We will be following up our recommendations—not necessarily in writing, as the Minister kindly invited us to do, but probably through the mechanism of our annual report. We attach importance to ensuring that Select Committees follow up their own recommendations.

Our objective was summed up by the title of our press notice about the report:

"Committee forecasts bright future for UK fishing industry".

Nothing that I have heard this afternoon dissuades me from that view. There is indeed a bright future and it is vital that we talk up the industry to help it to achieve that. In that positive spirit, I am delighted by the excellent attendance this afternoon. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan was a little worried about the fact that the debate was taking place here, but more hon. Members contributed than probably would have been the case for a debate in the main Chamber. I find that interesting and I am grateful to all the hon. Members who participated.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 December 1999

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

BBC World and World Service

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

10 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have commenced the proceedings in this Chamber dead on 10 o'clock. On a matter of personal interest, why do we begin deliberation and debate without prayers? I do not want to take up a great deal of time, but I would like to put on record that we are breaking a tradition that goes back to 1558. I hope that serious consideration will be given to the commencement of parliamentary proceedings in the House of Commons, by having prayers at the start of every sitting.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Prayers will be said at the normal time of 2.30 pm in the Chamber of the House of Commons, and there is therefore no break with tradition. My colleague in the Chair, the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), gave a ruling on this matter in which he made it clear that, if hon. Members have any queries, they should be taken up with the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons.

10.1 am

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I am glad to have an opportunity to raise this important issue, which is of great concern to public policy.

Like many hon. Members, I attended the lobby a few weeks ago that drew our attention to the implications of the decision by the BBC to discontinue the broadcasting of current affairs comment and analysis on the BBC World television service. The main thrust of my remarks today will be about BBC World television, although I will allude to the BBC World Service for comparison and example.

BBC World television was launched in 1991. At that time, the BBC wanted to run a television service along the lines of BBC World Service radio provision. This debate is a throwback to Mrs. Thatcher, as she was then known. She was hostile to the World Service, and cut its budget; she was also completely opposed to the BBC launching a TV channel internationally. She said that the channel had to be commercial, or that there should be no channel at all. On that basis, the BBC, anxious to respond to the challenge of Cable News Network—CNN—decided to set up a commercial channel. It started in the far east, and has now extended its coverage to all major parts of the world. The problem with that, as the Minister will be aware, is that one cannot run a world-class, worldwide television broadcasting service on buttons. Last year, the BBC World television service lost £15.6 million. As a result, the management of the BBC has decided to cut its losses by removing in-depth current affairs comment and analysis from its programming.

Many hon. Members will find that an astonishing decision, because if the BBC has a unique selling point—if the BBC means anything in the world—it is its world-quality comment and analysis in the English language, which are trusted and seen to be objective. A BBC World channel without those does not merit the description of meeting the BBC's international standard and aspiration.

Part of the problem is that the BBC is between director generals, and it is hard for it to focus on the point of decision. There is no doubt that the BBC is split internally over this decision. I have received strong representations from people who insist that their interest is not simply as programme makers being deprived of the opportunity to ply their craft, but as people who feel that something very valuable is being removed from the service. The BBC says that it wants to concentrate the service on entertainment and sport.

The NATO spokesman, Jamie Shea, said at the briefing a few weeks ago that there was no shortage of television channels offering entertainment and sport—in fact, that there was a glut of them; they were everywhere. Although such an option may be more commercial, there is a conflict between commercial pressure and public policy interest, which must be resolved as a matter of urgency, in the national interest—and in Britain's interest abroad—and not in the interest of short-term accountancy pressures in the organisation of the BBC.

It is worth stating that Sky—perhaps not a major competitor, but working in the same sphere—has made it clear how important it believes news to be, and that it never expects news to make a profit. A Sky news spokesman said:

"The news is a key strategic asset within Sky, as it adds a lot of kudos and authority. We see it as a public service first and foremost."

That is the ethic of Sky, for heaven's sake. We must question whether the BBC shares it—which is shameful. My honest view is that the BBC not only shares that ethic but can exceed it. However, it finds itself unable to do so in the current circumstances.

It is also worth recording the scale of success achieved by BBC World. It is estimated to reach 150 million homes in nearly 200 countries and territories. It has its own website and has made a feature of current affairs and analysis. If one visits the BBC World website, and asks for information for advertisers on this commercial channel, one finds key facts about BBC World, apart from its penetration. Item 3 states:

"BBC World provides news, business and weather 24 hours a day, plus the best of the BBC's current affairs, documentary and lifestyle programming."

Item 5 states:

"BBC World provides unmatched, impartial, in-depth analysis of breaking news, as well as looking at the stories behind the news and important live events—explaining not only what is happening but why."

That is BBC World today, but that will not be BBC World in six months' time if the cuts go ahead. That the BBC management is about to withdraw two of the key claims on the website, allowing people to commit to advertising on the basis of such assurances, is a slight breach of undertaking.

The specific success and distinctive character of the BBC mean that it reaches where comparable and competitive channels choose not to go. It has

[Mr. Malcolm Bruce]

distinguished itself in the coverage of Kosovo—from a European rather than an American perspective—of East Timor, of the Indian general election and of the coup in Pakistan. There were 4,000 hits on the BBC World website within an hour of the first international broadcast by the new leader of Pakistan. It has also given coverage in sub-Saharan Africa. At the briefing a few weeks ago, a representative from Médecins Sans Frontières said that, without the attention that BBC World gives to those theatres, its work would not necessarily reach the same proportion of opinion-formers and supporters to enable it to continue effectively. We are talking about a serious loss of coverage, because without BBC World's distinguished coverage in such areas, who else would offer it? How else would the world get to know what was going on?

The NATO spokesman, Jamie Shea, who became famous as a result of his role commenting on the war in Kosovo, said:

> "Very frequently, where once in a foreign ministry I would see CNN on all day, now I see BBC World, including the State Department and the White House in the United States, and I can't think of a higher accolade than that."

But will it still be switched on in six months' time if this in-depth analysis, which the State Department does not feel that it can get from other sources, is withdrawn from BBC World?

I shall not detain hon. Members with a string of comments. I shall simply say that there are many testimonials from people who have been directly affected by the coverage of their area, their conflict and their problems. East Timor is a case in point. A viewer in Portugal described BBC World as having shown the world, throughout the crisis, what the United Nations and the USA pretended did not exist, and urged the service not to stop doing so until Indonesia stopped. Such comments are extremely valuable, and should not be discounted lightly.

Mrs. Gillan: The hon. Gentleman mentioned CNN. What is his view of the move by CNN and MSNBC—the Microsoft and NBC Network—into the World Service's traditional domain, and, in particular, their development of new services in new languages? Is that a threat to the first class world service of the BBC?

Mr. Bruce: It may be a threat, but the subject of the debate is the threat from inside the BBC. If the BBC pulls out of core services when other channels are expanding into them, it will not find it easy to return and re-establish itself in a few years' time—if that is its plan—when the channel has become commercially viable. I agree with the thrust of the hon. Lady's intervention, which is that the BBC's decision is very poorly timed.

When John Tusa was head of the BBC World Service, there was an organised campaign to persuade the Government to reverse the cuts that were imposed. That was only partially successful—the service still suffered significant reductions—and I give total credit to the Government for reinstating the funding in the comprehensive spending review. Although BBC World would argue, given the range of challenges that it has to meet, that it is operating on a tight budget, at least it is now broadly protected. That is in contrast to the cuts under latter Conservative Governments.

BBC World receives not a penny of public subsidy—its losses are funded by the BBC—whereas the BBC World Service received £161.5 million in 1998–99, directly from the Foreign Office grant. That is welcome and important, and, under the comprehensive spending review, it will receive an additional £44 million over the next three years. That has enabled the World Service to notch up 143 million listeners, which means it is the most successful international world broadcaster. All of us are proud of that, and the Government recognise and support it. If the Government acknowledge the importance of the World Service as part of foreign policy, should they not explain why the BBC World television service—even though it reaches a different mix of viewers—should be denied even a penny of support? I do not mind whether the money comes from the Foreign Office, the BBC or a commercial partnership; I mind if the service is cut, and if the Government stand back and allow that to happen. I challenge the Minister to assure us that that is not the Government's intention.

I have had discussions with the BBC, and was told the accountancy reasons behind the decision, which are understandable but not acceptable. Several questions arise as a result. BBC World is not a trading corporation, but is supported by BBC Worldwide, which is such a corporation. Therefore, why should BBC internal management not continue to fund the losses if it chooses?

Questions have been raised about the extent to which the BBC's cross-subsidising might constitute unfair competition. The evidence does not suggest that, however, as a commercial arm of the BBC is involved. Could not the Foreign Office offer ring-fenced funding for current affairs and analysis programmes that are not on commercial channels?

In the long term, a BBC World television service that is too dependent on commercial advertising might be open to commercial pressure, which could compromise independence. That could be important on a controverisal international issue, such as genetically modified foods. Monsanto might choose to offer advertising contracts worth several million pounds to the BBC in order to gain leverage in coverage of its activities. It would be more likely, however, that advertisers would withdraw or threaten to withdraw if they felt that the BBC had hit a raw nerve.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): My hon. Friend touches on an important point. Even if there is no threat, there is a risk that the viewer will perceive one. I found it strange that a business programme was sponsored by the Welsh Development Agency. It provoked the nagging doubt that people might question impartiality.

Mr. Bruce: That is true, although I am more concerned about solutions. I am exploring a number of possible avenues and problems. If I had my way, the Government would argue that the BBC World television service was a proper complement to the BBC World Service, and should be funded as the BBC originally wanted.

As time is critical, my main concern is to find a solution to the short-term problem and to ensure that analysis and comment continues; the long-term solution can be addressed on a more relaxed time scale. The figures that we are considering are extremely small—Sir Michael Alexander commented that it was extraordinary that the core component and fundamental justification for BBC World would be cut for the sake of £5 million. Do the Government accept that the future of comment and analysis on BBC World is key to the national interest?

Some slightly defensive commentators in the BBC say, "We hope you will do something, but we know that there are no votes in it." I do not accept that there are no votes in the issue, for two reasons. First, the British travel quite a lot, and those who have encountered BBC World and who can choose it against any of its competitors know that it is of superior quality. As the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) pointed out, other broadcasters are starting to try to compete, and we may receive representations from British travellers if they feel that the quality of the service is falling. The Minister might want to reflect on the fact that, if the decisions are taken in April, the complaints will be made in the run-up to the next election.

Secondly, Ministers, Governments, business people and the wider public are proud of the reputation of the BBC across the world. The BBC stands for reliability, objectivity, trustworthiness and in-depth comment and analysis. That has served the British interest extremely well, and it would be extraordinary if we were to surrender our English language comment to interior competitors.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham, those American-oriented competing channels will pursue the English language interest as determined by the Americans. I am not anti-American, but I am pro-British; I support our role in the English-speaking world. We must match the Americans in the English-speaking world, because we play our role so much better.

In a speech on 22 November, the Prime Minister said that he had a vision of Britain as

"a power at the crux of alliances such as the Commonwealth, the United Nations and the European Union—engaged, open and dynamic, a partner and, where possible a leader in areas and influence".

How on earth will that be achieved if BBC World is not there to provide such things? I hope that the Prime Minister will agree on reflection that £5 million is not a lot to pay to support that noble aspiration.

At the briefing, Sir Michael Alexander said:

"No one should be surprised if CNN ignores meetings in which UK and European interests are foremost; crises in which UK and European interests are primarily at issue; conflicts in which European forces are more important than those of the Americans."

That is what we are up against. A worldwide English language service that is generated in Britain, and which does not promote British propaganda but examines the world from the perspective of Britain and the English language, is competing with a growing number of channels with far greater commercial backing than the BBC, which are determined to dominate the airways and promote a different agenda to a different English-speaking world with different priorities.

I am glad that a Foreign Office Minister is replying to this debate; that is entirely appropriate. I hope that he will accept that this is a serious and important public policy issue. I am also glad that the Government recognise the value of the radio arm of the World Service, and have supported it properly and adequately. However, I shall be disappointed if they stand back and allow BBC World television to become something far less than it aspires to be, should be, and is capable of being, given the resources at our disposal.

10.22 am

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I speak in support of BBC World television, although not uncritically. As a consumer of that service, I have often felt frustrated by the lack of sufficient coverage of United Kingdom domestic politics. That is a problem not only for those of us who travel abroad, but for residents and citizens of countries with a rapacious appetite for United Kingdom political news. Having said that, I value the service, and it is one on which we can build, so I am deeply concerned by the BBC's proposed short-term decision-making cuts.

I may be doing the Minister an injustice, but I predict that his briefing notes will counsel that he tell this Chamber that the Government sympathise with the broad thrust of what is said this morning, but that the decision is a commercial one, to be taken exclusively by the BBC. Each time that he says that, I shall say "Gong!", like the gong that used to be struck on the television programme "Take your Pick", which was hosted by Michael Miles. I ask the Minister to pull back from that brief and say that he, the Foreign Secretary and, indeed, the Prime Minister will reconsider the matter, as the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) urged so eloquently.

Although I regret the commercial dimension, which is a legacy of the dogmatic attitude of Margaret Thatcher, I should say that other parts of government become involved in commercial considerations. The Government ensure that we are at the cutting edge of technology. The Prime Minister himself has trespassed into the question of genetically modified foods. The Government have a hands-on involvement in privately owned aerospace industries, and in defence procurement. The Government need to protect the United Kingdom's wider commercial interests and our capacity to pack a punch on the world stage. For power projection and our longer-term commercial interests, this matter is one in which the Government and, indeed, the Prime Minister, should be involved. If they take the opposite view, the decision will be impossible to reverse and the loss will be permanent.

To use an historic analogy, as Minister of Technology, the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) saved the British regional jet. That was a critical decision, and he has been proven right. In broadcasting and political terms, if the Government use their good offices to intervene with the BBC, or to find interim finance, they will be making a comparably wise decision on behalf of the UK.

We are at a critical moment in world history. We and our allies are desperately trying to build civil societies in a number of fragile parts of the world. I am thinking in particular of the Russian Federation, where young

[Mr. Andrew Mackinlay]

people hunger to learn about British society, our parliamentary traditions, our free media, and all aspects of the English language. That is reflected in other parts of the world, particularly in those for which the Minister has responsibility, such as west Africa.

Also, of course, there are some 80 million people in the principal European Union applicant countries—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia. If we build our bridges now, we shall reap long-term political advantages in European Councils, but we are not doing enough in that regard. I regret to say that the Prime Minister has not visited one of those countries, which is somewhat indicative of our laid-back attitude. That could be offset in a small way if the Government were to demonstrate commitment towards those people, who are our potential political allies and love our common language.

The hon. Member for Gordon has rightly pointed out that the problems associated with BBC World are a legacy of Margaret Thatcher's dogma, but we have to live with them. BBC Worldwide needs BBC World to generate advertising revenue. Part of the problem is the Asia crisis, which reduced revenue, but here there is a potential gilt-edged investment. As the global economy inexorably expands, there will be tremendous scope for pan-world advertising. At some stage, BBC World will be capable of making a profit—we must simply hang on in there. According to the BBC's own conservative commercial projections, that stage will be reached in approximately eight years. I think that it may be reached sooner, but eight years is in any case a short time in which to bridge the financial gap. If we do not bridge it, the political, economic and cultural loss will be enormous.

I emphasise that the substitution of "fun" programmes for the quality analysis programmes that the present structure provides will not meet people's needs, particularly those in central and eastern Europe, who want to learn and understand the political, economic and business language that is inherent in such programmes.

We should also pause and take note of what the hon. Member for Gordon said about BBC World radio, which is an extremely important, highly valued service, with a tremendous reputation. I realised only recently BBC radio's inherent technological difficulties in reaching various parts of the world; the potential for BBC World television is limitless because of satellite technology.

The Minister of State should note that the Foreign Affairs Committee was horrified to realise that, for instance, large parts of the Russian Federation cannot receive BBC radio. This weekend, my wife and I were in Krakov in Poland—at the heart of Europe—and we could not receive BBC radio. Perhaps we did not properly understand the radio dials, but BBC radio was not easily accessible. However, television demonstrably is. The Government should seize this great opportunity to advance the interests of the United Kingdom.

What can the Government do? The hon. Member for Gordon suggested that they should consider bridging the financial gap, and I support him in that. At the highest level—the Foreign Secretary or the Prime Minister should be involved—the Government should, at the very least, call in BBC representatives to bang heads together and use their good offices to persuade the BBC of its long-term commercial interests and its duty to the United Kingdom. I might be doing the Foreign Secretary an injustice, but I am concerned by reports that, when the issue was put to him, he expressed sympathy—that will be in the Minister's brief—but said that funding should not come from his Department's budget. There is the rub. It would be a tragedy if a tranche of money to bridge the gap could not be found from the estimates for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or from other sources.

I hope that the Prime Minister will personally addresss that matter. I told the Minister before the debate that I had raised the matter with the Prime Minister at an informal private meeting last Wednesday week. To be fair, I should say that the Prime Minister made no commitment, but he said that he would consider it. I then wrote to him; he would have received that letter on 29 November. So far as I am aware, and despite our interest in joined-up government, I am not sure whether the Foreign Office knows that No. 10 is involved. That is another compelling reason why the Minister should disregard his brief, and tell us that he will trot along to see his chief later today to discuss the matter with him.

The Prime Minister should be reminded that the people in Pristina who turned out to acclaim him knew him not from CNN, but from BBC World television. As the hon. Member for Gordon said, if we are to reach the goal of being a pivotal power that the Prime Minister spelled out in his Mansion House speech, we must ensure that the United Kingdom's valuable, but relatively cheap, high-quality flagship projects, such as the British Council, BBC radio and BBC television, should be buttressed, supported and encouraged by the Government.

10.34 am

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): The BBC mark is one of the nation's most tremendous marks overseas. Everyone accepts that it has enabled us to retain our broadcasting reputation abroad and to punch above our weight both diplomatically and politically. In other words, it is a priceless asset in both radio and television. The future of BBC World is therefore a matter not simply for the BBC or for its advertisers, but for everyone. Indeed, it is a matter for the Foreign Secretary and his Ministers of State, because, whether the Government like it or not, a cut in BBC World will be seen as a foreign policy decision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) referred to the reach of BBC World Service and BBC World television. BBC World Service started in 1932 and now reaches 200 million homes. That is a tremendous achievement. The BBC is regarded internationally as superior to all other international broadcasters. That reflects wonderfully on the country's reputation abroad. BBC World Service has high ratings for trustworthiness and quality, and it is doing well with modern media: it is accessed more than 50 million times a month on the internet.

You will notice, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I am interweaving BBC World Service and BBC World. That is because they are two sides of the same coin: they are

the face of the country abroad; they are provided by the same organisation; and they have the same reasons for existence. The fact that they are separately funded—one through Foreign Office grant in aid and the other by advertising revenue—is, as other hon. Members have already said, an historic accident. I shall return to that point later.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon said, BBC World television now reaches 160 million homes in nearly 200 countries and territories. It reaches 50 per cent. of United States households with televison sets—even in CNN's home nation, BBC World is making great strides. I agree with the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) that BBC World is not perfect, I, too, have watched it when abroad: one can see the joins. Nevertheless, it is a very good product for the amount of money spent on it, so it is an asset that should not be easily and lightly thrown away. One should not spoil a ship for a ha'p'orth of tar.

BBC World losses amounted to £16 million last year. I know that one can lose £16 million a year quite easily: for example, the Treasury is spending £113 million on refurbishing its building in Whitehall. I do not know how many BBC World years that would buy—my arithmetic is not quite perfect—but it seems that money is available for pet projects. I suggest that it is more important for BBC World to be funded than it is for the Treasury to be refurbished—and it is in the UK's interests, both internationally and domestically.

The loss has been reduced by 36 per cent. and advertising revenues have increased by 100 per cent. since September last year. It took 12 years for CNN to turn a profit, so it is unrealistic to expect BBC World to break even soon. A further question is whether cutting back will help the service to meet its commercial targets, or whether it will make it less attractive to advertisers. Advertisers use BBC World because they want to be associated with the BBC's good qualities, but if BBC World becomes a third rate version of CNN, advertisers will ask whether it is worth using it.

A similar argument was made for cutting back the railways in the Beeching years. It was said that, if one cut unprofitable railway lines, the lines that were left would be profitable and that—hey presto—the railways would go into profit. However, once the branch lines were cut, it was discovered that passengers could not get to the terminuses of the profitable lines, which then became unprofitable. Sometimes, financial equations that appear to work do not make sense in practice. The best way to attract advertising revenue is to produce a quality product that attracts a premium in the market.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and the hon. Member for Thurrock referred to the artificial division that took place in 1986 in the funding of the BBC World Service. That funding was long established as grant in aid from the Foreign Office, but the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, insisted that it receive public funding over her dead body. A number of the former Prime Minister's dogmas and prejudices have subsequently been discredited, and there is no reason to believe that we need to hold on to them. We might even lose that inheritance entirely as we move into the 21st century.

What is the reason for insisting that BBC World should be commercial? Those who wish to defend the status quo must answer that question. The former Prime Minister did so because of her unnecessary and illogical hatred of the BBC, but she also hated public services generally and wanted to make them commercially oriented and, as far as possible, not dependent on public funding. That was her agenda. It is not my party's agenda, and I do not believe that it is the Government's. We need to revisit that debate, and say why BBC World should not be publicly funded. My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon put the matter in a nutshell when he said that, if there is a case for the BBC World Service to receive grant in aid in recognition of its value overseas, how can it be different for television? It is logical for both or neither to be commercially funded. The present position makes no sense.

Another problem arose back in 1994 when John Birt, Director General of the BBC, split BBC World from the BBC World Service and combined it with BBC Worldwide. That also makes no sense. The outlets, countries and people are the same, as are the news gatherers—the journalists. The fact that one service can be heard on the airwaves, and the other seen on television, is an artificial distinction. The BBC should consider carefully whether it would be more efficient for BBC World and the BBC World Service to be reunited.

BBC World performed commendably well on a shoestring during its initial years. It was asked to compete in a top-class race against CNN and others while having to carry a loaded rucksack. That situation was inherited by the Government and current BBC management. Instead of trying to remove that rucksack, allowing BBC World to flourish, adding extra weight is proposed, by removing some of its credibility and world reputation. We cannot expect BBC World to retain its reputation if cuts are made to essential parts of it, such as current affairs and news. International viewers will not be fooled for ever.

The BBC said that it is not possible to transfer resources from its domestic operations to BBC World. Is that correct? If so, it is wrong in principle. BBC News 24 spent more than £50 million in 1998–99. Perhaps hon. Members will forgive me for suggesting again that News 24 is so called because of the number of its viewers. Such spending is an extraordinary waste of money given that BBC World performs so much better and with greater impact on a larger audience.

Mr. Malcom Bruce: Does my hon. Friend find it eccentric that the BBC is touting around the House for support for additional charges to fund its digital channels when it is discontinuing the news service on BBC World for the sake of £5 million?

Mr. Baker: I absolutely agree. The BBC should answer hon. Members' questions on BBC World and BBC World Service before they ask for more money for ephemeral projects that could be funded in other ways. I hope that that will happen when the Government reply to the Davies report.

The BBC World Service and BBC World should be linked again and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon suggested, BBC World should qualify for grant in aid. There should be a ring-fenced arrangement, at least for current affairs and news, so that the independence, financial stability and full planning of BBC World can be guaranteed. BBC World should be

[Mr. Baker]

given a free rein and proper support to perform well. That would not cost a fortune and it would be money well spent, which would be more than repaid by the maintenance of the United Kingdom's interest in the world. It is a foreign policy issue and I hope that the Minister wil recognise that in his response.

10.44 am

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I shall be brief, as always. These are important matters, in which I have an interest to declare. I was a chair of the briefing, which was conducted not by representatives of the BBC's management, which at times of difficulty affect the stance of the pre-emptive cringe, deflecting blows that have not yet been aimed, but by the workers at the coal face and people such as Jamie Shea, who know full well the importance of BBC World in the world. I also worked for the BBC for 30 years, so I should know a little whereof I speak.

It is interesting, and says a lot about the service, that it has drawn the hostility of both Mr. Ted Turner and Mr. Rupert Murdoch—two of the great predators of our time. They are threatened by its quality, truthfulness and commitment to values other than the merely commercial. I was present at the birth of BBC World; there was a long gestation of around eight years before the fragile infant was finally delivered. The infant has grown in strength and has become one the BBC's unsung success stories. As Jamie Shea testified, at times of international crisis, the world now turns to the BBC. That was certainly so during the Kosovo crisis, when millions of people, especially in the Balkans, depended on what the BBC was telling them.

The BBC is necessary for a number of reasons, one being the nature of ITN—[*Interruption.*] I withdraw that. I mean CNN, with apologies to my former rivals. The BBC cannot be a third-rate CNN because CNN is already a third-rate CNN. It is insular and ignorant. I remember when it failed to distinguish between the Irish Republican Army and the army of the Irish Republic. Hon. Members will know that that is no slight distinction. It is Americocentric and nothing in the world matters to it except the United States and its interests in a way that the BBC is not Anglocentric. The BBC takes a wider view of the world and its responsibilities to the world, its domestic and foreign audience and the truth.

Mention has been made of News 24. It is astonishing the the BBC should celebrate 75 years in broadcasting with the greatest waste of money in all that time—£30 million blown away on that invisible service, which is viewed by 0.1 per cent. of the population and dilutes the BBC's journalism. I know what effect it has on people in the field who are required to devote their energies to broadcasting to a non-existent audience when there is a huge audience and an even greater potential audience for BBC World. The comment and analysis function must not be stripped from BBC World.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the BBC might serve two purposes if it withdrew News 24 and allowed the British public to see BBC World and to understand the quality that it is missing at home?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The British public would be extremely well served if that were to happen.

BBC World must not be allowed to become a rip and read service, thereby emulating some of the worst features of its main American rival. Reference has been made to a common Foreign Office phrase—the United Kingdom's ability to punch above its weight. Two institutions are able to do that. One is the armed forces, with their singular quality and effectiveness, and the other is British broadcasting abroad, by which we mean, almost exclusively, the BBC.

Hon. Members may remember that, when the new Government came to power, they set up Panel 2000 to project Britain abroad—Britain as it is. I was a member of that panel—I do not know whether it still exists—and remember that our most effective instrument for projecting this country, its values and a concept of truthful broadcasting that people can believe was the BBC, in both radio and television. I make no distinction between those services because, as the radio's audience declines and fewer people listen on short-wave, more people are tuning in to television. I urge the Minister to think carefully about that.

I cannot think of a more important area in which the expenditure of a relatively small amount of money would have a greater effect. It would do the country good, and the world good, to keep BBC World broadcasting truthfully and effectively as a beacon of light and truth.

10.50 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): First, I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, I believe that it is your first time in the Chair in this Chamber, and on behalf of all hon. Members present, I welcome you. It is good to call you Madam Deputy Speaker.

At the instigation of the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), we have so far had an interesting albeit short debate. I am surprised that so few people have participated in a debate on such a serious subject as BBC World and the BBC World Service. I hope that that will not be reflected in all the debates in this Chamber. I made my personal views known earlier about the efficacy of this second modern Chamber—or, as I have been calling it, the secondary modern Chamber. I am sad that there are not more hon. Members from all parties present for this important subject.

I share the views of many people in the world in that, when I have travelled in far-flung places, I have turned to the BBC for news, information, security and comfort. I have not been in war-torn regions, as the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) has been, but I have worked in some inhospitable places, such as Moscow soon after the iron curtain came down, where it was impossible to receive any information. At times, we would sit for five hours trying to dial a number outside Moscow, just to send a telex. However, we could turn on the radio and listen to the BBC; to hear the chimes of Big Ben was a great comfort to me and many others, not only the British in our community.

The BBC World Service is a great source of pride. It broadcasts in 44 languages. Since 1979, its audience has grown from about 75 million to more than 133 million, which is twice the audience of its nearest competitor, The Voice of America. I agree with the hon. Member for Tatton about the quality of some of the broadcasting that we receive around the world, which has its roots in America. The standard and accuracy of reporting and the one-sided view that is put across is damaging to those who listen to such broadcasts, whereas with the BBC there is a true feeling of independence and objectivity, which we all hope will be maintained. The Tories have come in for some criticism in this debate.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Only Mrs. Thatcher.

Mrs. Gillan: When I last looked, she was a Conservative. Yes, Mrs. Thatcher has come in for some criticism. But when the Tories were in government, we increased spending on the World Service by 53 per cent. in real terms. That record stands extremely well, particularly against the record of the Labour Government from 1974 to 1979, when fewer languages were broadcast and there was no real-terms increase in the funding that was given to the World Service.

I am disturbed about the funding of the BBC World Service and I asked the House of Commons Library for some relevant information. The figures that I obtained show the Foreign and Commonwealth Office grant in aid for broadcasting and, given that a Foreign Office Minister is replying to the debate on behalf of the Government, it is apposite that I share the information that I received. The Library said that the World Service

"receives Government money for its monitoring services. Prior to 1997–98 this was in the form of grants from the FCO and Ministry of Defence. From 1997–98 all official users of BBC Monitoring pay a subscription charge. The total Government support to the monitoring service remains broadly the same (£18.8 million in 1997–98 compared with £19.1 million in 1996–97) but the FCO contribution has fallen."

In 1996–97, the contribution fell in real terms by 7.6 per cent. and, from 1997–98, it fell in real terms by 4.4 per cent. Although expenditure in 2001–02 is planned to be higher in real terms than it was in 1997–98, during the run-up to the general election, the plans show real terms decreases in 2000–01 and 2001–02. I see that the Minister is making a note of the Library's figures and I hope that he will have a good explanation for such substantial drops in the grant in aid.

Mr. Bruce: I understand from my briefing that the monitoring service made a profit of £1.3 million, which might explain why the Government are withdrawing funding. That is understandable, but it also demonstrates the potential for money from that source to be rediverted to make up the BBC World Service deficit. The hon. Lady is making a telling point, to which it would be interesting to hear the Minister's reply. If the BBC can make a profit, is it not logical that it could go towards filling that hole?

Mrs. Gillan: I am not known to hunt in pairs with Liberal Democrats, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The Minister certainly has some serious questions to answer.

I draw the Minister's attention to the fifth report of the Foreign Affairs Committee on Foreign and Commonwealth Office resources dated 22 June 1999. The section on the BBC World Service budget in paragraph 30 of the report raises a serious point. The Committee stated:

"The World Service is an invaluable asset to the United Kingdom. The World Service is facing increasing competition and is required to keep pace with changing technology. On its present and projected budget it will fail to meet both. We recommend the FCO ensures that the World Service is adequately financed to respond to these challenges, with its funding being increased at least to the level in real terms that was achieved in the 1993–94 and 1995–96 period."

That was a serious indictment from the Foreign Affairs Committee, which, I believe, has a Government majority. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) is nodding his head and he was a member of that Committee. The Minister must tell us what the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is doing about the Committee's recommendation. We hear rumours about the Chancellor of the Exchequer storing up billions of pounds. We are debating one of our most powerful diplomatic tools in the globe and, for the sake of a small amount of money, we could preserve not only a British institution, but a world institution.

There was another telling section in that same report. When I intervened on the hon. Member for Gordon, I referred to the double jeopardy of increased investment in competition by second-rate American broadcasting outfits. There is also a triple jeopardy, because of the diminution of one of our other world-class organisations, the British Council. Hon. Members are nodding; we may even have cross-party consensus in this new Chamber.

The Committee makes a serious point in paragraph 42 of that report, stating:

"We believe that the British Council is seriously underfunded and that the promotion of Britain's language, education and culture, in which the British Council has a key role to play, is of enormous benefit to the UK. The British Council's target of £160 million in real terms by 2002–03 represents only a 10 per cent. increase in real terms on the level achieved in the early to mid 1990s"—

under Conservative Governments. It continues:

"We consider that an increase of such a magnitude is both affordable and fully justified, and we recommend it to the FCO."

I want to know what is going on at the Foreign Office. It seems that British institutions that have provided a first-class service around the world for many moons are being starved of funds by a mean Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It is not only Conservative Members, but hon. Members from all parties who believe that the Minister must answer some serious questions. The Minister has a long time in which to respond to the many issues that have been raised.

Mr. Baker: Before the hon. Lady ends her speech, will she clarify whether it is Conservative policy for BBC World to benefit from grant in aid in the way in which the BBC World Service does?

Mrs. Gillan: The hon. Gentleman does not believe that I am as green as I am cabbage-looking. I do not intend to make Conservative policy on the hoof in an annexe to Westminster Hall. However, I can tell him

[Mrs. Gillan]

that the Conservative party, when in government, put its money where its mouth was and supported the BBC World Service. Any future Conservative Government will do so, and they will support the British Council. The current Government have effectively withdrawn funds from both organisations. I hope that the Minister will now furnish us with a suitable explanation.

11.1 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): I, too, welcome you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulate you on your accession to that title, which is well deserved in this Chamber at least—[*Interruption.*] I should like you to have that title in all Chambers, but that is out of personal respect.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) has given me the opportunity to speak on behalf of one of Britain's finest national assets—the BBC. I acknowledge his passion for the BBC, and that expressed by other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) and the hon. Members for Lewes (Mr. Baker) and for Tatton (Mr. Bell), whose esteemed professional career in the BBC I acknowledge. Regrettably, I am not tempted to abandon my brief, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock invited me to do. I also acknowledge the statements in support of the BBC made by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan).

I shall begin by drawing a distinction between the BBC World Service, which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office funds through grant in aid, and BBC World television—I pause for the gong—which is a commercial operation funded by subscription and advertising.

I shall start with the BBC World Service, because the Foreign and Commonwealth Office funds it. The World Service aims to be the world's leading international broadcaster. As others have acknowledged, its audience reach—143 million people—is the highest ever. No less a figure than Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, said last year that it is a service to the world as a whole and is perhaps Britain's greatest gift to the world this century.

The Government are fully committed to a bright future for the World Service. As the hon. Member for Gordon said, that was why last year we announced an additional £44 million in grant in aid to the World Service for the three years 1999–2002. I commend the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham on her cheek in calling that funding mean, given that the Government that she supported through the 1980s and 1990s progressively attacked the World Service against massive popular opposition, including from within the House.

Mrs. Gillan: Will the Minister confirm that approximately £40 million of that sum went towards building the new transmitter in Oman?

Mr. Hain: The World Service spends the grant in aid that the Foreign Office gives it on improving its services, and one form of the expenditure may well have been that transmitter. If so, it would have extended services across the world, and I am sure the hon. Lady would not want to quarrel with any extension of the World Service, which she has spent so much time praising.

Mrs. Gillan: The Minister is most generous in giving way, but as he has half an hour in which to speak, I am sure that he will be grateful to any hon. Member who intervenes. Is he happy that the grant in aid from the Foreign Office to the World Service fell by 7.6 per cent. in 1996–97 and 4.4 per cent. in 1997–98? Will he confirm that those figures, which come from the Library, are correct and that there will be a real-terms decrease for 2000–01 and 2001–02? I see that inspiration has arrived.

Mr. Hain: The first figure that the hon. Lady quotes relates to the last Conservative Government, and I am not happy about it. The second year came within a financial framework that had been set by the last Conservative Government. She does not dispute that we are providing an extra £44 million, which represents a substantial increase in funding for the World Service.

Mr. Mackinlay: Hon. Members obviously applaud that additional funding, but the Minister's brief does not tell him that BBC radio cannot, and never will, reach large parts of the world for which he has personal responsibility in his ministerial portfolio, whereas television will be able to reach those people and provide all the services to which reference has been made this morning. I welcome that money, but a slice of it would be much better directed towards such services so that they reach the folk in respect of whom he has some jurisdiction—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. Interventions must be brief, even if we think that we can be generous with the time.

Mr. Hain: I am aware of some things that are not in my brief, and I acknowledge the fact that BBC World does not reach some parts of the world, including some for which I have policy responsibility. I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about BBC World, and I shall deal with it. I should like it to reach many more parts of the globe.

Before generously allowing those interventions, I was making the point that the increase in funding that the Government are happily providing is intended to enable the World Service to implement an ambitious strategy of embracing the latest technology. We want to ensure that it remains the most respected and most widely listened to voice in international broadcasting. I am sure that there is unanimity on that in this Chamber.

The World Service faces stern challenges, both competitively and technologically. The speed of change in broadcasting is breathtaking, but I am confident that the World Service will meet those challenges—indeed, it is already doing so. I am delighted that it is exploiting to the full the fast growing medium of the digital age—on-line broadcasting. Internet users throughout the world can listen to the World Service's English programmes live. By embracing that new technology and the distribution opportunities that FM and rebroadcasting offer, the World Service aims to become a leading-edge multimedia broadcaster.

Some things will not change. Many audiences around the world—tens of millions of people—will remain heavily dependent on the World Service's traditional core radio services for many years to come. The World Service is developing its FM output, but there will be a continuing focus on short-wave delivery. I have seen for myself how dependent many audiences—for example, those in India, which I visited last month—are on the World Service's short-wave broadcasts and will be for some time to come. The World Service is striking exactly the right balance between the old and the new. Its concern for all its listeners will ensure its continued success.

The World Service's programmes will continue to be underpinned by the BBC's core strengths and values: trust, reliability and independence; quality, expertise and relevance; truth, accuracy and impartiality. The hon. Member for Tatton rightly referred to those values as being far superior to those of its rivals because the BBC is a beacon of light and truth.

The World Service is, importantly, editorially and managerially independent of Government, and will remain so. I shall quote the Secretary-General of the United Nations. He said:

"It serves Britain and the world by being independent and, therefore, credible."

He continued:

"What is remarkable is that successive British Governments have understood that."

Mr. Baker: Will the Minister give a straight answer to a key question? Where is the logic in requiring the World Service to be 100 per cent. funded by the FCO, including the real increases to which he referred, while requiring BBC World to be 100 per cent. commercially funded?

Mr. Hain: I am about to give a straight answer to the hon. Gentleman's question. The broadcasting values, which I was describing and which we all agree apply to the BBC World Service, also govern BBC World television. Everybody knows that BBC World is a commercial operation funded by subscription and advertising. The Government do not fund BBC World; it is part of the BBC's commercial arm, and is separate from the World Service. The decision was taken in 1988 that there should be no public funding for the BBC's proposed international television service. That decision has been vindicated by the success of what has followed. [HON. MEMBERS: "What?"]

We have all been celebrating that success. BBC World is available in 150 million homes across 200 countries, which is a credible and creditable achievement on which the BBC is to be congratulated. As hon. Members have said, BBC World has faced difficulties in recent months, and I share their concern about those difficulties. It is a long-standing principle that the Government do not intervene in the BBC's decisions on programme content, and I doubt that hon. Members would invite a Minister to do so; nor do we interfere in scheduling or staffing. I am pleased that the BBC's board of governors, which has both the duty and the means to represent the public interest, has expressed its commitment publicly to the continuance of BBC World television. I have relied on it during my ministerial travels all over the world in recent months. It is far superior to CNN—I agree with the comments of the hon. Member for Tatton in that respect—and to any other world television service.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Why does the Minister believe that it does not matter if the BBC withdraws from comment and analysis? We are trying to press him on this matter. He is stating the self-evident, but will he say whether the Government, as a matter of policy, are concerned that that aspect of BBC World is about to be discontinued? Do the Government care or not? Will they do anything about it?

Mr. Hain: By definition, the Government care a great deal about all the policies for which they are responsible. I agree with the hon. Member for Gordon that it is a matter of concern that the comment and analysis sections of BBC World will disappear. The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock is well taken. BBC World television reaches where other channels choose not to go. To be fair, I think that it was the hon. Member for Gordon who said that first. Both hon. Members were making the point that BBC World covers issues such as Kosovo, East Timor and other matters of great international concern in a way that is unrivalled by other channels.

The cut in the comment and analysis section of BBC World is based on a programming decision. According to the BBC's chief executive, the market will not bear hour-long analysis programmes, which CNN and Sky do not broadcast. Hon. Members may challenge that view and they are entitled to do so directly to the BBC's chief executive. He says that BBC World will lose market share because people will not wish to—

Mr. Bruce *rose—*

Mr. Hain: I am just explaining the chief executive's point of view. He says that people will not want to concentrate or continue to watch BBC World, but will turn to its competitors.

Mr. Bruce: I understand that it is the chief executive's view, but the collision between commercial interests and public service broadcasting is exactly the issue that we are debating. The BBC is between a rock and a hard place: either it can be a commercial channel, of which there are hundreds, if not thousands, or it can be a public service broadcasting channel, with or without commercial funding. The Minister seems to be evading these fundamental points: do the Government have a view; do they have a policy; do they care; and will they even talk to the BBC about the proposed cuts?

Mr. Hain: I have been explaining the Government's view and I shall continue to do so in more detail.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): My understanding is that the BBC feels that it has to cut the programmes that are specifically produced for BBC World, but that it will fill up the available time slots with in-depth programmes drawn from its home-based news production. We are not getting a clear message from the BBC about whether it is programming replacements from its home-based programmes, or whether it is just cutting out such programmes. That needs to be clarified.

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, which the board of governors and the BBC's management will, no doubt, want to answer.

[Mr. Hain]

I understand the concens that have been expressed, but there are two points to make. First, licence fee money or other income could be shifted across to BBC World. In the case of licence fee income, it would have to be requested by the BBC by way of a representation to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Secondly, we recall that Sky Television's early years were loss-making years and that Rupert Murdoch decided to bear those losses by what became a booming, profitable service. As my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock described it, for the BBC to do the same would be a gilt-edged investment. I do not think that anyone would disagree with that.

The BBC may decide that that is the policy that it wants to pursue. It may be able to treat BBC World as a loss leader, on the basis that it will make substantial profits as its range extends and its reputation is more appreciated across the world.

Mrs. Gillan: I find it rather depressing that the Minister is reading his brief so well. We are talking about cuts, which, if they were made to Radio 4, would affect "Today", "The World at One" and "The World Tonight". More important is the question of what the Minister is going to do about the proposed cuts. Will the Foreign Office give the BBC some support, to encourage it to rescind the cuts that are anticipated in the next two weeks? Will the Minister get off his brief and do what we all want him to do, which is support the BBC, so that when he next meets Xanana Gusmao, the East Timorese leader who has pleaded specificially for the service to continue, he will be able to look him in the face and say, "I saved the World Service"?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. This is an important debate and I hope that hon. Members will remember that interventions should be such, interventions, and not secondary speeches.

Mr. Hain: I am sure that the BBC will have taken note of the points made by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham, as I have done. I have expressed my commitment to BBC World television repeatedly. It is an extremely important service, and I want it to be expanded and investment in it to increase. It has expanded very successfully under this regime. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) pointed out, there is a choice involved. It is not a question of a big black hole appearing in BBC World's services.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce *rose—*

Mrs. Gillan *rose—*

Mr. Hain: I shall give way in a moment, but I want to come to my point, which answers all the points that have been made. Several hon. Members have sought to draw a parallel between the role of BBC World and the World Service and to argue that that means that the Government should be more financially supportive of BBC World. As I said, BBC World was established as a commercial operation, whereas the World Service is first and foremost a public sector, subsidised broadcaster. The Government see no grounds for publicly funding BBC World, which has been hugely successful without public subsidy, from either the licence fee or parliamentary grant in aid. We strongly support its effort to project Britain to a mass international audience.

Mrs. Gillan *rose—*

Mr. Hain: I want to finish this point, after which I shall be happy to respond to any interventions that may come my way.

A fundamental point, which has not so far been acknowledged in the debate, is that the BBC World Service competes in a subsidised market. Its competitors are the Voice of America, Radio France Internationale and Deutsche Welle. In contrast, BBC World television competes in an unsubsidised market against CNN, Sky and ITN. Parliament has never given authority for grants in aid to go to BBC Worldwide.

If the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham is allowed to intervene, she must respond to my point or answer my question, although I accept that it is not her responsibility to answer questions. We are proud to give Foreign and Commonwealth Office grants in aid to the BBC World Service, but if we gave them to BBC World television, we should invite immediate and strong commercial protests from, for example, ITN, Sky and CNN. Does the hon. Lady accept that those protests would make it difficult to continue to implement our policy?

Mrs. Gillan: When did the Minister last meet BBC representatives, and when did he discuss this matter with them?

Mr. Hain: I have not met BBC representatives recently to discuss this matter because it has only just arisen. I hope that all hon. Members reflect on my point: does any hon. Member want the Government to adopt a position that would involve attracting immediate commercial and, conceivably, legal challenges to BBC World television from commercial rivals that are direct competitors? Some of those competitors are based in Britain.

Mr. Mackinlay: The message from this debate—I shall paint it on the Minister's eyelids, if necessary—is that the Minister, the Foreign Secretary or the Prime Minister should talk to the BBC about this matter. At the very least, the Minister should give a commitment this morning to do so.

Mr. Hain: I am happy to give that commitment and to convey to BBC World television the strong feelings that hon. Members have expressed about the cuts in this debate. However, in that meeting I shall not seek to intervene in the BBC's management decisions or programme content, because it would be wrong for any Minister to do so. Those matters are the BBC's responsibility, and it is publicly accountable for its decisions.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: The Minister has made his position clear. Hon. Members who have already spoken

may be unhappy about that position, but at least we had a clear, if regrettable, statement of policy. However, the Minister should accept that many people believe that the Foreign Office should have a view on the service's future. The Minister and other Foreign Office Ministers—and, if possible, the Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Thurrock suggested—should have discussions with the BBC. It had the freedom to take the decision, and it has the freedom to reverse it. Persuasion from the top might help.

Mr. Hain: I shall emphasise several points. First, no hon. Member has so far disputed the essential point that I made about the difference between the BBC World Service, which operates in a context that includes other subsidised services, and BBC World television, which does not operate in such a context.

Secondly, I am happy to report the views that have been expressed during this debate, to engage in discussions with the BBC and to seek an explanation from it of its adopted course of action, which concerns all of us. However, I shall not give a commitment to interfere with the BBC's managerial ability to determine programmes, the way in which it schedules its services, or its programme content or priorities.

Mr. Baker: Do not the Voice of America, Deutsche Welle and Radio France Internationale supply television services? Is the Minister convinced that none of those services receives a public Government subsidy?

Mr. Hain: I have already discussed the comparison, and my point has not been challenged. [*Interruption.*] No, it has not been challenged. Britain's reputation for diversity and independence in international broadcasting is the envy of the world, and we should do our utmost to preserve that reputation. The continued success of the BBC World Service and of BBC World television is vital to that objective.

I stress the fact that the Government are committed to the continued success of BBC World television. We hope that it will expand its coverage and reach parts of the world that it has not yet reached. We shall support it in that objective, but I shall not interfere in the BBC's detailed programming or managerial decisions. No doubt it will take account—

Sir Robert Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hain: No, I have dealt generously with interventions.

We shall not interfere in the BBC's detailed decisions, but we want BBC World television to expand. I must stress that we are giving more money to the BBC World Service than has ever been given before, and that we have been much more generous than our Conservative predecessors. We are committed to the service—wherever I go, I support it and I listen to it across the world—and we shall continue to support it. It is vital to Britain's role in the world. The BBC's policy of providing the highest quality broadcasting services in radio and television throughout Britain and the rest of the world must continue to be successful.

11.26 am

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Although the Minister would not give way, there is sufficient time in this debate to emphasise what I was trying to say in my intervention. He said that he was committed to BBC World, but he also said that he should have no influence on or interest in BBC World. He did not show any practical commitment to it; we have heard only soft words.

The Minister said that the 1988 decision had been vindicated, but this debate would tend to suggest that it has not been. He must think carefully about the way in which this country projects itself abroad. BBC World is an integral part of that image. It and the BBC World Service provide the same service, but on different platforms and using different technologies.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) rightly said that the way in which Britain projects itself abroad, through the British Council and the World Service, pays dividends in all sorts of ways, and that many benefits are returned to our economy. If we project our culture, methods and society abroad and engage foreign countries effectively, we can develop industries and other commercial activities on the back of that success.

Mrs. Gillan: In the time that remains, I must stress that the Minister was disingenuous in the way in which he—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member has already spoken once. We should at least give the Minister the opportunity to say the odd word.

11.29 am

Mr. Hain: I want to respond to the comments of the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir Robert Smith), who seemed to suggest that the service was going downhill and collapsing. It now reaches 150 million homes in 200 countries, and BBC World television is going from strength to strength. It does so with the Government's active support and backing.

This morning, we discussed a decision about which hon. Members and I are concerned. BBC managers say that the decision was taken in order to protect the BBC's competitive position in relation to audience reach. Hon. Members are free to disagree, and have disagreed, with that decision.

The idea that the Government are turning their back on BBC World television or radio services is a total travesty. We give more support to the BBC than has been given previously; we back the service in every way that we can, and we shall continue to do so. Our debate will allow BBC managers to take account of the real concerns that have been expressed about BBC World television. No doubt, they will want to reflect on the points that have been made. I shall happily meet them but—if I may be forgiven for putting it this way—I

[Mr. Hain]

cannot accept lectures from the Liberal Democrats, and certainly not from the Conservatives, who spent year after year attacking the BBC's domestic and international services. An unrivalled expansion of the BBC World Service and of BBC World television occurred under the present Government, and we shall continue—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We must now move on to the next debate.

Benzodiazepines

11.30 am

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the privilege of opening this debate. This is the first time that I have spoken in the new Chamber. Westminster Hall is not bad as lean-tos go. I shall be grateful for your guidance.

The debate has been given weight by the recent report of the Select Committee on Health on procedures related to adverse clinical incidence and outcomes in medical care. I draw that report and the evidence gathered by the Committee to the attention of hon. Members.

The story of benzodiazepines is of awesome proportions and has been described as a national scandal. The impact is so large that it is too big for Governments, regulatory authorities and the pharmaceutical industry to address head on, so the scandal has been swept under the carpet. My reasons for bringing the debate to the Chamber are numerous and reflect the many strands that weave through the issue.

I was first alerted to the matter when a constituent, Mr. Barry Haslam, wrote to me describing the nightmare in which he has lived as a result of having taken benzodiazepines. He was prescribed Ativan—one of the family of benzodiazepine drugs—for 10 years. As a result, he suffered permanent brain damage, hearing and thyroid problems, fatigue and mood swings, bad circulation, pains in his limbs, slurred speech and memory loss so severe that he cannot remember the past 10 years of his two daughters' growing up: he has lost 10 years of his life. He and other members of the Oldham Tranx support group would have been here today had that been possible.

There are good days between the bad days for the victims of tranquilliser addiction. Like many others of the Victims of Tranquillisers group, Barry is a campaigner. My first impression was that he was a member of the green spidery ink brigade—he bombarded me with letters, documents, quotations and research that he and others had painstakingly eked out of officialdom. However, my constituent is not an obsessive, but a highly intelligent and articulate man with enormous courage and a loving wife who has supported him throughout his campaign. He is a victim of damage to his brain caused by years of heavy dosages of benzodiazepines. There are in this country many thousands of similar cases in which harm has been done, not only to individuals who take the drugs, but to the children of mothers addicted to benzodiazepines while pregnant.

I have permission to cite the case of Mrs. Jackie Gillard, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith). Mrs. Gillard wrote to me:

> "My life is in the pits. I am unable to go out. I get panic attacks. I go to bed and ask God to let me die in my sleep."

Mrs. Gillard's is an especially difficult situation, as her two sons also appear to be victims of the addiction.

Angela Smith (Basildon): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for having given way; I want not to detract from his excellent comments, but to place on record my gratitude that he has mentioned my constituent.

I have been distressed by the letters that I have received from my constituent on the matter, in which she details not only the impact of the drugs on her, but the effect on her family. She could not even attend her father when he died in hospital, because she could not go out. I ask my hon. Friend for his comments on something else that she has said:

"Life just frightens me every day."

Mr. Woolas: I have received correspondence from hon. Members on both sides of the House describing awful and heart-rending cases such as Mrs. Gillard's from round the country. Recent media interest includes documentaries by the respected "You and Yours" programme on Radio 4 and Tyne Tees Television, and numerous television and radio news reports supported by press reports.

Evidence submitted to the Select Committee by Dr. Peart, national co-ordinator of Victims of Tranquillisers, details the story of benzodiazepines for the past 40 years. In his introduction to that evidence, he says:

"the catalogue of misprescribing, misdiagnosis and mistreatment . . . has cost this country billions of pounds."

The side effects of benzodiazepines are not widely known, despite publicity. Patients are not given the full information about the side effects and are, therefore, unable to make an informed choice. My constituent, Mr. Haslam, would never have taken the drugs had he known the problems that they cause, despite the difficulties that they were originally intended to cure.

As early as 1980, a report in this country on the use of benzodiazepine-based drugs suggested that they were effective for only 10 days, after which they were no longer effective against the wide variety of problems for which they were originally prescribed. It is now an established fact in the medical profession that it takes only seven to 14 days for addiction to take hold of someone taking benzodiazepines. The problem is twofold: the addiction and the paradoxical side effects.

Guidelines on the prescription of benzo-based drugs suggest that patients should be closely monitored while using them, but that does not happen in practice. Patients are able to obtain repeat prescriptions of the medicine without seeing a health care professional, which can lead to patients being prescribed benzos for many years without being offered an opportunity to lower the dosage or try alternative treatments.

There are many problems related to the drugs beyond addiction and side effects. They can have catastrophic effects on children born to women prescribed them, such as congenital defects, and physical and mental handicaps; there is evidence that they can cause attention deficit disorder and autism. Increasing problems related to the black market and street use of benzodiazepines are emerging. In 1996, the previous Government made the benzodiazepine Halcion illegal. However, there is an increasing street market in other benzodiazepines: Rohypnol—the date rape drug—is a benzodiazepine. Benzodiazepines are increasingly used and abused with alcohol and opiate-based drugs.

The group that campaigns for action on the issue claims that there has been a contravention of the Medicines Act 1968 by drug companies producing these pharmaceuticals. It is claimed that they knew about the cases of addiction, toxicity and side effects before the drugs were even licensed. The *Journal of the American Medical Associations* reported the problems as early as 1969. The Department of Health must increase its funding of research into the after effects and consequences of the drugs.

My constituent, Barry Haslam, has permanent neurological damage and other disabling conditions, yet he has recently been refused disability living allowance, which he had received for many years. On most days, he would fail all seven tests for mobility allowance and all four tests for care allowance, but on other days he is perfectly articulate and able to look after himself, get about and hold down part-time work, were any available.

The issue also concerns the Department of Social Security, which must urgently improve the disability benefits handbook on the matter. I remind hon. Members that MIND estimates that 1.2 million people are affected by addiction to benzodiazepines. For 20 years or so, benzos, including Valium, Ativan and Lorazepam, were fashionable drugs. They were prescribed in abundance on both sides of the Atlantic and considered to be the cure-all for depression, sleepless nights and a range of problems thought to be associated with the modern world. However, it took more than 25 years for United Kingdom medical authorities to issue guidelines, and it was not until 1988 that the committee on review of medicines toughened up the prescription guidelines for general practitioners.

In 1979, some 30 million prescriptions for benzos were issued in this country. Drug manufacturers, led by the company Roche Products Ltd., launched an onslaught on the medical profession, including 1,000 visits a week made by company representatives to general practitioners. Despite the 1980 review, prescriptions continued to be issued at similar levels throughout the 1980s. Even today, on the latest figures available, MIND estimates that 16 million prescriptions are issued each year. The drugs are being prescribed to one in four adults, to women more commonly than to men—indeed, twice as often. More than 1 million pensioners take benzodiazepines every night, supposedly to help them sleep. Despite the weight of evidence from both sides of the Atlantic and the current guidelines on prescriptions, no victim from those 20 to 30 years has ever been compensated. All collective legal actions have been withdrawn as legal aid licences have ended. A solicitor of Drummond Miller of Edinburgh, a well-known law firm in Edinburgh city, described as impossible the fight that the campaign has waged against the

"might of the multinational drug companies".

Indeed, in the United Kingdom, only one individual's legal case remains outstanding—and all power to his elbow.

I have no doubt that controlled and time-linited use of benzodiazepines can bring enormous relief to some patients. However, 40 years after their introduction, 30 years after the first warnings, and 10 years after the UK authorities put on the brakes, they remain commonplace and are still prescribed above the recommended level. The blight on our streets is getting worse. Home Office statistics show that such class C drugs are now a commonplace commodity in the street

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market. In the past three months in my constituency, benzos have been the target in two burglaries of pharmacies, and there are hundreds of such cases throughout the country. The 1998 Home Office statistical bulletin shows that, from 1990 to 1995, 1,602 deaths were directly related to benzodiazepines, including 683 suicides. In the same period, 218 deaths were linked to heroin, and 483 to methadone. That is the scale of the problem.

In a recent Home Office pilot project undertaken in five locations throughout England, 61 per cent. of people arrested tested positive for drugs, one fifth of whom—12 per cent. of the total—tested positive for benzodiazepines, compared with only 10 per cent. for crack and cocaine combined and 8 per cent. for methadone. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has recommended the introduction of additional controls on the import, export and possession of benzodiazepines, which, according to parliamentary written answer No. 93720, the Home Office is "actively considering". I believe that, in the lexicon of Sir Humphrey, "actively considering" means "probably". Let us hope that the Home Office acts forcefully and quickly.

We need joined-up policy. Leading academics on the subject have presented evidence to the drugs tsar, Mr. Keith Hellawell. We need recognition of the harm done to thousands of people, robust guidelines that are forcefully promoted and a review of the classification of benzodiazepines. We need stringent support for addicts in the NHS, social services and the voluntary sector, to ensure that the withdrawal from such drugs is beneficial and does not increase the pain and suffering of many addicts. The problem of benzodiazepines is an iceberg, involving, according to accepted figures, 1.2 millon people addicted as a result of over-long prescription of the drugs. It involves an increasingly dangerous street trade and a level of ignorance and lack of awareness that is perpetuating the problem rather than solving it, 40 years after the first warnings of the effects of Valium.

11.46 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas) on having raised this important issue. I assure him and my hon. Friends the Members for Basildon (Angela Smith) and for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn)—he takes a close interest in such matters—that we treat the issues raised extremely seriously, and have no intention of sweeping them under the carpet.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth said, a great deal of research has been conducted and much has been written on the topic over the past 25 years or so. In the past three years, the Medical Research Council has commissioned more than £1.5 million-worth of research into benzodiazepine use. The largest project, which is worth more than £1 million, deals specifically with benzodiazepine addiction.

Based on the findings of existing research, current advice from the Committee on Safety of Medicines is in the British National Formulary, which as my hon. Friend will know, is distributed regularly to all doctors. It states clearly that benzodiazepines are indicated for the short-term relief of anxiety that is severe, disabling or subjecting the individual to unacceptable distress, occurring alone or in association with insomnia or short-term psychosomatic, organic or psychotic illness. The use of benzodiazepines to treat short-term mild anxiety is now considered inappropriate and unsuitable. The Committee on Safety of Medicines advises that benzodiazepines should be used to treat insomnia only when it is severe, disabling or subjecting the individual to extreme distress.

My Department has taken several measures to support the appropriate use of such drugs, a matter to which my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth referred in his thoughtful and well-constructed remarks. We recently published a new national service framework for mental health services, in which we spell out national standards for mental health, taking into account mental health promotion, primary care, access to services, effective services for people with severe mental illness, and other issues. Of particular relevance to this debate is that primary care services in the national service framework are required to work with specialist care providers to develop and implement assessment and management protocols for several mental health problems, including anxiety disorders, for which benzodiazepine is prescribed. Those protocols will draw on the best available evidence and will help to establish proper consistency in managing such conditions throughout the country.

My Department has also been focusing on preventing addiction or dependence from ever occurring, by warning GPs and other prescribers of the potential side effects of prescribed medicines and in particular of the dangers of addiction to benzodiazepines.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of the side effects of pregnant women using benzodiazepine. I understand and am currently advised, that there is no proven link between benzodiazepine use and damage to developing foetuses. Current advice is that all drugs should be avoided in pregnancy if at all possible. The Government keep the issue of benzodiazepine use in pregnancy under close review, as we do the use of other drugs, through organisations such as the Advisory Council on Drug Misuse.

Doctors have an ethical responsibility to inform patients about any treatment proposed, including possible side effects of prescribed medicines. It is the responsibility of health authorities to ensure that adequate prescribing controls are in place. Conspicuous poor prescribing would result in disciplinary action from either the health authority or the General Medical Council. The use of clinical audit and peer review has also provided a powerful incentive for local clinicians to study their patterns of care and improve prescribing standards, which is now part of the Government's clinical governance agenda.

The Department funds a number of publications that provide up-to-date information on a variety of treatments. Those are made readily available to GPs, pharmacists and other health professionals. As my hon. Friend will know, the British National Formulary is published by the British Medical Association and the Royal Society of Great Britain and is issued every six months, free of charge to all GPs, pharmacists and other health professionals. The medicines resource centre

publishes a monthly bulletin giving up-to-date information on the treatment of various conditions and the drugs involved in such treatment.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does my hon. Friend agree that our knowledge of the chemistry of the brain is in its infancy, and that the rash, vast over-prescribing of benzodiazepines has done damage that dwarfs all that done by illegal drugs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas) made clear? We are repeating those experiments now with the prescription of Prozac and Ritalin. Ritalin is prescribed to 2 million children in America. Should we not tell pharmaceutical companies that they should not be allowed to use dangerous drugs with unknown consequences in an experiment that serves not the public's need, but companies' profits?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. Of course, the subject of the debate is benzodiazepines, but he raises the subject of Prozac. I am quite happy to correspond with him about his concerns, or he could come into the Department and discuss them with officials and with me. If possible, I would like to confine my remarks today to the issue of benzodiazepines.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. That is indeed the subject to which the Minister must confine his remarks.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am trying hard to do so, tempting though my hon. Friend's intervention is.

In addition to the literature available to GPs, most health authorities employ professional advisers, both medical and pharmaceutical, whose role is to provide another source of advice and information on medical and prescribing issues to GPs in the area. Those arrangements have had tangible success in the sense that the number of prescriptions for tranquillisers continues to fall. That focus on preventing people from becoming dependent on these drugs has resulted in the number of prescriptions of benzodiazepines dispensed in the community falling steadily from more than 20 million in 1985 to a little more than 13 million in 1998, which is lower than the figure quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth.

The volume of benzodiazepine prescribing in the community is monitored and has this year been included as a national indicator of performance of the national health service through the performance assessment framework. That should allow health authorities to compare how they perform against national averages, and to benchmark themselves against similar organisations within the NHS, so as to identify where they can improve their performance. The monitoring of prescriptions of benzodiazepines is further developed in our recently published national service framework. Local clinical audit programmes are being asked to focus on prescribing rates for a range of drugs, including the benzodiazepines. As the mental health minimum dataset, which is being piloted, is rolled out across the country, the prescription of benzodiazepines will be monitored in relation to hospital, as well as community, prescribing. I hope that my hon. Friend welcomes that.

What have we been able to do to tackle dependence on these drugs? Treatment may be offered in primary care or in more specialised settings. Clear advice is given in the British National Formulary that withdrawal of benzodiazepines from patients who have developed dependence problems must be gradual. In some cases, a withdrawal programme may extend over many weeks. It is important that people are well supported during the process and helped to develop other ways of coping with their anxiety, sleeplessness and other symptoms.

For those who have developed dependence on tranquillisers, treatment may be offered in primary or secondary care settings. Anxiety management, which may be provided on an individual or group basis, often includes a focus on cessation of usage of tranquillisers. Therapy in secondary care may be made available in clinical psychology departments by way of a day hospital or community mental health team. Counselling and psychotherapy are available on the NHS and form an important part of the range of medical and non-medical provision for people with mental health problems. All such issues are covered by the national service framework. We know that such treatments can be effective. They are increasingly popular and are in great demand. That is why we are committed to ensuring that the right treatments are delivered where they are needed most.

The Department issued "Drug Misuse and Dependence—Guidelines on Clinical Management" to all GPs in April. Those guidelines were written and peer-reviewed by experts. They give advice on treating misuse of a range of drugs, including benzodiazepines, and will reflect best evidence and knowledge of what works in treating drug misusers. For example, they contain advice on the best way to manage benzodiazepine withdrawal. Given that the only source of benzodiazepines is through diversion of prescribed medication, the guidelines stress to doctors and professionals the importance of appropriate and secure prescribing.

There are, of course, several organisations working to help people to overcome benzodiazepine addiction and that includes voluntary sector bodies. In 1994, the Mental Health Foundation produced an excellent publication entitled "Guidelines for the Prevention and Treatment of Benzodiazepine Dependence", which was aimed at general practice. It not only gives a summary of good practice in prescribing, but sets out a protocol in the management of benzodiazepine withdrawal. It remains as valid today as it was in 1994, and those working in general practice would be well advised to apply the principles that it sets out. The Mental Health Foundation also issued a booklet aimed at people who use tranquillisers, entitled "A Guide to Starting and Stopping Tranquillisers and Sleeping Tablets", which contains good, practical advice.

Apart from the Mental Health Foundation, I should like to mention the Council for Involuntary Tranquilliser Addiction. CITA aims to raise awareness of the problems of drug addiction and to support the withdrawal and rehabilitation of those addicted to tranquillisers. It helps to train doctors and other health workers in respect of benzodiazepine withdrawal, and provides support to a variety of health professionals. It does that by running 27 clinics in GP practices and by providing training through workshops, conferences and

[Mr. Hutton]

literature, as well as a helpline that is open five days a week. In addition, it provides a valuable resource for the media, fielding inquiries and providing information.

I mention that because my Department helped to maintain and consolidate CITA's helpline with funding of more than £30,000 over three years. In addition, earlier this year, my officials met representatives of CITA to discuss its current work programme and to see what further help we could give. I am pleased to say that CITA has now made an application for further assistance from next April to help to establish a number of clinics on Merseyside. That will build on its existing good work, most notably in Wigan and Bolton, and provide for face-to-face counselling coupled with the innovative use of natural therapies in helping patients to cope with withdrawal. I am not in a position to say today what the outcome of the application will be, but I hope that we will be able to include it in our wider programme of support for the voluntary sector.

I now want to concentrate on the concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth about our part of the world, the north-west. He raised concern about the proportion of people attending drug misuse treatment in his constituency who report benzodiazepines as their main drug. Nationally, that proportion is relatively low—about 2 per cent. I understand that that figure is roughly the same in my hon. Friend's local health authority—the West Pennine health authority—and the north-west region as a whole.

Much more worrying is the proportion of people who report using benzodiazepines as a subsidiary or secondary drug. Nationally, that figure is about 16 per cent. I understand that the figure for the West Pennine authority is much higher, at about 40 per cent. That is also higher than figures for elsewhere in the north-west region.

I assure my hon. Friend that we are acting to reduce high levels of prescribing. For example, in the West Pennine authority, audits have been carried out of GP practices. In addition, the health authority intends to run a series of workshops aimed at primary care staff to inform the way in which they prescribe benzodiazepines. The West Pennine health authority plans to relaunch its guidelines for planned benzodiazepine withdrawal, and that will be fully audited to determine the success of GP withdrawal programmes. There will also be a review of the evidence for use of benzodiazepines by drug misusers to develop further guidance for GPs. As part of the Department of Health's north-west regional offices's performance review of its health authorities, benzodiazepine prescribing will be monitored very carefully.

I fully understand my hon. Friend's concerns about benzodiazepine prescribing in his constituency and I hope that he will be reassured about the action we are taking. The regional office and the health authority will continue to consider the issue closely in future. We are aware that, although a lot of good work is already under way, there is more to be done to ensure that everyone has access to the best possible services.

Although benzodiazepines will continue to have a place in treating short-term mental health problems, alongside counselling and other psychological interventions, I can assure my hon. Friend—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Public Transport (South Gloucestershire)

12 noon

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I am grateful to have this opportunity to raise the issue of public transport in south Gloucestershire, and in my constitutency of Northavon in particular, because the issue affects the quality of life of my constituents more than many others. Because Northavon is a mixed rural and edge-of-city constituency, car use is not a luxury, but a necessity in many cases. I frequently receive letters about public transport, so I am grateful to have the chance to draw the issue to the Minister's attention today.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge and welcome what has been done during the past few years. Although I have many criticisms of the current situation, there have been some small steps in the right direction. We were grateful to receive funding through the rural bus grant scheme and the rural bus challenge scheme, which has funded some vitally needed community transport initiatives in south Gloucestershire. Those initiatives have identified an untapped demand and have been overwhelmed by interest from people who need those services, but have hitherto been unable to access them.

A preliminary skim—I confess to no more—of the Transport Bill suggests that its measures on bus services will be a modest step in the right direction. However, my contention is that the measures that have been taken, welcome though they are, are insufficient to deal with the scale of the problem. I shall talk about bus services in south Gloucestershire and say a few words about train services and rapid transit schemes to highlight my concerns, in the hope that the Minister can reassure me that the Government's strategy is adequate to deal with the scale of the problem.

One of my main concerns is that bus subsidy arrangements are not providing the taxpayer with good value for money, because bus companies have councils over a barrel. I shall give one example of how I believe that things have gone wrong. Recently, a new out-of-town shopping centre, The Mall at Cribbs Causeway, opened in my constituency. Many of my constituents shop or work there; one of the smaller private bus operators in the area spotted the potential for a new commercial route from Yate, the largest town in my constituency, to The Mall, and it set up a bus service. The dominant bus company spotted this and decided that it, too, would run a service along the same route. Before long the inevitable happened, and the first company was driven—almost literally—out of business.

The slightly sinister twist to the story is that the dominant bus company then decided that it could not continue to run the service either and told the council that it could not keep the service going. The council was then faced with the problem of shoppers who wanted to go to The Mall and workers who wanted to get to their jobs; both groups had established patterns of travel by bus. The council was faced with something similar to blackmail: either it could let the service die, with the result that the shoppers and workers would clog up the roads even more, or it could step in and provide subsidy. Sure enough, public money was found to subsidise what had previously been a commercial service.

Public money should be used to provide better bus services, but it is only lining the pockets of the bus operators. The inequality of power between the bus company and the local authority greatly concerns me. At the start of the process, the private operator decides which services it can run on a commercial basis. That leaves the council to identify from among the remainder routes where tendering is required, but that tendering process is almost a joke. In parts of my constituency, 80 per cent. of tenders go to one company, so there is one dominant group—the First Group, in various incarnations. That company knows that, if it does not identify a route as a commercial route, there is a good chance that the council will pay it to run a service on that route anyway. I am concerned that, in that way, money that should be used to improve services is being used to help bus companies.

What about the quality of services? There is a traffic commissioner, who, in principle, is supposed to keep an eye on such things. However, I am reliably informed that, if I were to say that he had a handful of inspectors in my constituency, I would be guilty of gross exaggeration. He does not have adequate resources to deal with the task. I am not convinced that public subsidy for bus services in south Gloucestershire is good value for money. I believe that to be is a legacy from the deregulation that took place 10 to 15 years ago. I accept that some modest steps in the other direction may have been taken, but I have reservations about whether those steps have gone far enough.

I have mentioned the rural bus grant, which I welcome, but it takes a long time to change people's patterns of travel, especially in rural areas. People move to rural areas in the knowledge that they can get to work by car, and the availability of a bus service for a year or two will not change that pattern. Only if people know that a service will continue, year in and year out, and be reliable and dependable, will they have the incentive to change their habits. Therefore, I should be grateful if the Minister would outline for south Gloucestershire's residents what the future holds for services provided through the rural bus grant when the money runs out. What will happen in two or three years' time? Will those services simply cease, or can my constituents base their travelling patterns on the assumption that the services will continue?

I understand the need for the rural bus grant to produce new services, but that rule has created some anomalies. I understand that money cannot be used for services that were in place on 1 May 1998, but that services started then and subsequently discontinued can be resurrected under the scheme. That creates an arbitrary distinction between services that are borderline—those which have been running for a few years and need to be kept going in the interests of the public transport infrastructure, but which cannot be supported through the scheme—and new services, for which there is not much demand, but which can be funded. I wonder whether that arbitrary cut-off date should be reconsidered.

Other arbitrary features of the scheme affect south Gloucestershire. The limit on communities numbering 10,000 or fewer has some odd consequences for my constituency. In neighbouring parishes, one can have a bus service and another cannot because of population density. In towns such as Thornbury, which is probably the second largest town in my constituency, the public transport network is poor. The area is rural, on any

[Mr. Steve Webb]

understanding of that term, but it cannot benefit from the grant. Clearly, there mut be a cut-off point, but I am not convinced that it has been drawn in the right place.

I should like to make one final observation on bus services before I move on to consider rail issues. The community transport support has been warmly welcomed. The Thornbury-Severn Vale link was opened by the previous Minister of Transport and, as I said earlier, demand for those services has been considerable. However, once again, we are faced with the question of what will happen in the long term. The money has bought the buses, hired the office and provided someone to run the scheme, but what is the future for the pensioners and disabled people who have become dependent on those services? In two or three years' time, will they still be able to go to their lunch clubs, visit their relatives or get to hospital? Some indication of the long-term position would be very valuable. I contend that people will change their behaviour only if they have security, predictability and reliability, and if they know that services will continue, rather than just exist for a while and then disappear. Indeed, the very act of taking away the subsidy at the end of a certain period demoralises people and causes them to think that they cannot rely on bus services.

I have dwelt at some lengths on buses because they are often seen as the poor relation of the transport network, but I want to touch on two other categories of local public transport. The local train services in my constituency—there are stations at Pilning, Severn Beach and Yate—are the Cinderella services. To give one example, when the rugby world cup was held in south Wales, trains were taken off the Severn Beach to Bristol line in order to take passengers to Cardiff. There is often a lack of investment in track and the quality of service is unreliable, so people give up using rail. Once people have given up using the railway, it is an almost impossible task to persuade them to come back. I hope, therefore, that the Minister will offer some reassurance that those local networks that are not mainline networks will have a key place in the future.

In that context, I must mention one issue that affects south Gloucestershire and many areas beyond, where a crisis is imminent. That is the threat by British Rail, or its successor, Rail Property Ltd., to sell off land adjoining stations and land that previously contained rail track. I understand that, in January 2000, 14 sites in south Gloucestershire may be sold off to the highest bidder. I should like to read from a letter from the public transport manager of South Gloucestershire council to the chief executive of Rail Property Ltd., sent in mid-November, in which the public transport manager expressed his concern. It states:

> "It appears . . . incongrous and . . . disappointing to a local authority that two different agencies of central government are working towards apparently diametrically opposite ends. One, the British Rail Property Board . . . has a remit to sell off former rail land to the highest bidder. The other, the DETR . . . has objectives of increasing use of the rail network (an objective which is clearly not helped if some of the most valuable land required to expand the rail network has been sold off for other development)."

Once that land is sold and there are houses on it, it will not be used for rail again and an opportunity will be gone. We need a clear steer from the Government, demonstrating that they are aware of the urgency of this issue and that they have it in hand. My local council's planning committee will meet on Thursday to consider the issue. All it can do to preserve those sites is to buy them at market value, but there is no money in the budget to do so, so what can it do? Must it watch the sites being sold and lose any hope of improving services, rather than withdrawing them? This is an urgent issue and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

Finally, I turn to the light rapid transit scheme from south Gloucestershire into Bristol, which has been a long-standing dream of many in the south Gloucestershire public transport sector—although a nightmare for others. Last year, I attended a presentation on that scheme. An experienced councillor said to me afterwards, "That was all very interesting, but I heard the same thing five years ago." People simply do not believe that it is going to happen. Trying to work out the Government's approach to this matter is akin to Kremlinology—we get a nudge here and a wink there. First, the new Government are assumed to be pro-public transport, then we hear that there is no money for light rail; now we hear that an area that might have road charges, such as Bristol, may get some money. We do not know what is really going on or when we will hear for sure. I would be grateful for a clear answer—whatever it is—so that we can plan local public transport services.

The problems I have described have deep roots. There is no overall strategy to address growth in road traffic in south Gloucestershire, yet still more houses are being built, still more people are moving in and dependence on the private car is increasing, not decreasing. I am unclear whether the Government's strategy for south Gloucestershire is that road traffic should fall, remain at current levels or rise by only a certain percentage; I am not even sure that they have said what their current strategy is. The pattern of development—that is, where houses and businesses are located—is reinforcing the pressure on the area's roads. I welcome what has been done so far, and we are grateful for it, but I feel that the scale of what has been done is not up to the scale of the problem. I hope that the Minister can convince me otherwise.

12.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on securing the debate. I am grateful for his reference to the modest benefits and advances resulting from Government policies to date; I suppose that we should be grateful for small mercies.

Local public transport is a popular and topical theme; indeed, I was dealing with the same subject only yesterday evening in a debate introduced by the hon. Gentleman's west country colleague, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter). This debate is also timely in the light of last Wednesday's publication of the Government's radical and wide-ranging Transport Bill. The Bill is a significant step towards a safer, more integrated and better quality transport system. It puts into practice many of the measures that we set out in our White Paper on the future of transport, the first comprehensive Government statement on transport in 20 years, which we published within 18 months of being elected.

Before I discuss the provisions of the Transport Bill, I shall respond to some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised about transport in his constituency. I am sure that he will know that each local transport authority is now required to prepare a local transport plan setting out its transport strategy and the measures necessary to carry that strategy forward. The provisional local transport plan for south Gloucestershire is being assessed by my officials in the Government office for the south-west, so I must be careful not to comment on the merits of its proposals or to speculate on the likely allocation of resources. I can make some general comments on the plan, but before I do so, it is important to set the scene in south Gloucestershire.

I know that there has been a great deal of new development in the district over the past 20 years, particularly in the north fringe of Bristol. The result has been growing traffic congestion, a trend that South Gloucestershire council is anxious to reverse through a variety of measures designed to increase the use of public transport. The provisional local transport plan identifies a wide range of opportunities to improve public transport in the district, including a scheme—to which the hon. Gentleman alluded—to establish a light rail system from Bradley Stoke on the northern fringe of Bristol to the city centre. It is being promoted jointly by Bristol city council and South Gloucestershire council and is envisaged as the first in a network of such links across Bristol and the surrounding area. The scheme's estimated capital cost is about £102 million, some 60 per cent. of which is expected to come from the private sector. The preferred method of meeting the remainder is through the private finance initiative; both councils are seeking support for that from the Government.

A full assessment of all local transport plans is under way. All major schemes, including light rapid transit systems, are being considered on their transport merits and on how they are integrated with the plans' objectives and strategies. We expect to announce very soon a shortlist of projects that might be supported over the next five years. Although I am unable to give a commitment on this particular LRT proposal, the Government welcome Bristol's innovative approach, especially its interest in piloting a congestion charging system. Given the long-standing enthusiasm of the hon. Gentleman's party for congestion charging, I hope that the Liberal Democrat-led South Gloucestershire council will maintain its support for that proposal.

South Gloucestershire council has an evolving quality bus partnership, which is designed to improve the quality and quantity of bus services. In developing that partnership, the council will address issues of fares and through ticketing for multi-stage journeys. Work is also under way in the north fringe of Bristol to establish an infrastructure for bus priority junctions through the introduction of urban traffic control systems. That will lessen delays and enable more accurate timetabling.

I recognise that conventional public transport cannot always meet the diverse accessibility needs of all in our communities. Voluntary action is the strength of local communities everywhere, so we are conducting a review of voluntary and community transport activity to gain a better understanding of the role played by the voluntary sector. We envisage parish councils in England as valuable partners in improving accessibility in rural areas. We would like them to take an increasing role in community transport and to use their powers to fund community bus services.

South Gloucestershire council is also working with Railtrack and the train operators to improve facilities and services and to investigate the potential for making better use of under-used rail infrastructure. In particular, the line to Severnside could be reinstated to service existing development at Cribbs Causeway. Interchanges between public transport and other modes form the key nodes of the transport system. By establishing and improving those interchanges, the council will try to achieve a more integrated public transport system with a greater focus within south Gloucestershire.

Mr. Webb: The Minister mentioned the route to Cribbs Causeway. That would go through Henbury, which is currently closed; moreover, it is one of the sites that the British Rail Property Board wants to sell off. Can the Minister tell me how the council might set about preventing that, given that there is no budget for it to buy the land itself?

Mr. Hill: I fully intend to address the issue of British Rail property in due course.

The council is committed to making information on public transport services readily available through a variety of media in a user-friendly format. With regard to the hon. Gentleman's concerns about bus services, I note that he welcomes the benefits that the rural bus grant initiative has brought to south Gloucestershire. The area has received nearly £200,000 through the initiative, which has produced 31 entirely new or improved bus services in country districts. One of the conditions of the new rural bus subsidy grant was that it could not be used to fund services that were running on 1 May 1998; in other words, it cannot be used to fund withdrawn services. Therefore, an operator threatening to withdraw a service could not expect to be rewarded by receiving a contract that is funded by a rural bus subsidy.

There might be cases in which an operator has to withdraw from a contract because it is no longer economic for it to provide the service under the terms of that contract. The 1 May 1998 rule for the rural bus service grant has caused some difficulties, but it is an important principle that new funding must be used to support new services. I do not apologise for that. Local authority associations were fully consulted on all the grant conditions and they specifically supported the 1 May principle.

The Government did not want the new money to leak into maintaining the status quo—for example, operators withdrawing services in the expectation of subsidy, or authorities with many conflicting priorities cutting their subsidy spending. However, we will consider whether the rules should be changed in future. The Government are carefully monitoring the effects of the rural bus grant initiative with a view to taking decisions in due course about its future operation.

[Mr. Hill]

Local bus services operate in a deregulated market: 85 per cent. of services are run by commercial operators and only 15 per cent. are subsidised by local authorities. It is for commercial operators to decide which services they wish to operate. Local authorities have the power to plug gaps, but we recognise that they often have to make difficult choices between conflicting calls on resources. The Government also propose to strengthen the powers of the traffic commissioners with regard to bus companies, as part of the new Transport Bill.

The hon. Member for Northavon expressed concern about developments on disused railway tracks. That matter has been considered by the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs—a most distinguished Select Committee, if I may say so, Madam Deputy Speaker. As a result of the Committee's recommendations, we have taken steps to ensure that Railtrack, railway companies and local authorities will be kept informed of land sales, giving them the opportunity to acquire sites that could be used to re-establish the rail network.

The Government have now taken a major step in promoting a more integrated transport system through the publication last week of the Transport Bill. The centrepiece of the Bill is better public transport, which will offer more choice for motorists and for everyone else. The Bill contains radical measures designed to deliver the safe, modern, high-quality transport system that this country needs and deserves. These include promoting the use of railways through the Strategic Rail Authority, improving bus services and reducing road congestion and pollution. The Bill is the most comprehensive piece of transport legislation for 30 years.

The question of the apparent delay in introducing this legislation has been raised. However, there are no instantaneous solutions, and much preparatory work has been required to enable us to identify the policies needed to overcome the failures of the past 20 years. We inherited high and growing levels of road traffic congestion, poor public transport, inadequate provision for pedestrians and cyclists, and significant under-investment in road maintenance. Nevertheless, we have already made significant headway through increased investment, especially in public transport and road maintenance. The measures in the Bill pave the way for the modern, effective transport system that the country needs and deserves.

Mr. Webb: I sense that the Minister has moved away from the issue of the sale of rail-owned land. He said that the local authorities had been notified about the land sales. Certainly, they have been told that there is a threat of certain routes being sold off, and that they will never be able to use them, but what can they do about that?

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. However, we do not envisage local authorities acting unilaterally to acquire land that might be used for either rail or alternative public transport purposes. We certainly do not expect the full burden of any financial responsibility accruing from the acquisition of such sites to fall entirely or even largely on local authorities. The Government's committment in transport policy is towards partnership: we certainly expect local authorities to operate in partnership with private operators, developers and other interested parties in such disposals in future.

The Government recognise that motorists will not readily switch to public transport unless it is significantly better and more reliable. We also realise that we cannot achieve these measures unless we are prepared to put more resources into public transport. That is why the comprehensive spending review allocated a further £700 million over the next three years. We are also spending an extra £170 million on rural buses, which has so far resulted in an extra 1,800 new and enhanced services in England.

A key measure in the Bill is the establishment of the Strategic Rail Authority, which will make railway regulation more effective and make sure that the fragmented rail companies provide a decent national service. We also recognise that buses are crucial to the success of our integrated transport system and that they can provide a real alternative to car use. Local authorities will be given the tools necessary to develop quality public transport in their areas, and to tackle road congestion and pollution. The Bill will enable authorities and bus operators to deliver more through ticketing, higher quality buses, more frequent services and better information. About 130 quality partnerships have already been established on a voluntary basis with bus operators throughout the country, the result of which has been an increase in bus usage of between 10 and 40 per cent. in the areas involved.

To deal with congestion and pollution, the Bill gives local authorities new powers to introduce charges on congested roads and to introduce workplace parking charges. The money raised will be put back into improving local transport, improving choice and tackling congestion. We welcome the strong interest expressed by the city of Bristol in the opportunities offered by this scheme.

The Transport Bill will set the national framework, but the onus will be on local authorities to put the measures into practice. We believe that local people are best placed to find local solutions to local transport problems. The hon. Member for Northavon will be aware that we have introduced local transport plans as a centrepiece of our proposals. Those set out authorities' strategies for transport and are the key mechanism for pulling all local activity together. Authorities will also have to prepare a bus strategy and will be given powers to make effective changes to benefit bus passengers. Together, the local transport plan and the bus strategy will provide a solid basis for implementing integrated transport policies at local level.

As a first stage in this process, all county and unitary authorities have now submitted their provisional five-year transport plans, on the basis of which resources will be allocated for the next financial year. Authorities will then roll on their plans by one year and submit full plans next summer for the period 2001 to 2006. We are assessing the provisional plans and will shortly announce the allocation of resources for next year.

From the feedback that we have received so far, authorities seem to be responding positively to the challenge of producing local transport plans. They have overwhelmingly welcomed the national policy framework, and the process of preparing plans is acting as a positive force for change.

The Transport Bill now provides a solid framework for creating a more integrated transport system in this country. It will now be up to the local authorities to take measures forward. South Gloucestershire council is clearly committed to creating a more integrated transport system in its district. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that it is too early for me to speculate on the outcome of the local transport plan process in south Gloucestershire, but the position will become clearer when the allocations are made for the new financial year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. As the hon. Member raising the next Adjournment debate is present, and the Minister is also with us, we shall now move on.

Methadone

12.30 pm

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Rehabilitation centres have relied on methadone as the primary treatment for drug addiction from the national health service for almost 30 years. I believe that there is a place for methadone in the clinic. However, although it is commonly used in the treatment of opiate addiction, and its use is endorsed in "Drug Misuse and Dependence: Guidelines on Clinical Management", it is now widely recognised as a street drug in its own right. It was solely responsible for 48 deaths in a six-month period in 1998. Nearly 59 per cent. of those who died had obtained the drug illegally, demonstrating clearly the view that methadone now has its own street currency.

Methadone is implicated as a drug of misuse, often associated with other drugs, in more than 400 deaths a year in the United Kingdom. Many addicts have reported that they find methadone harder to give up than heroin.

In Scotland, the use of methadone as a treatment for opiate addiction has been hailed as a state-sponsored drugs plague. It appears that methadone has been misused and over-used as the only pharmaceutical method of treating opiate addiction. Therefore, why is methadone widely advocated in this country as the optimum method for the treatment of opiate addiction? There are a number of reasons, and cost is not among them.

First, an inadequate appraisal has been made of the research evidence available on methadone. Secondly, we are too accustomed to the drug. It has been prescribed for more than 20 years for the treatment of opiate addicts, and doctors are not encouraged to prescribe alternatives. There is a lack of will to change prescribing habits in the United Kingdom. If we are to reduce the number of deaths each year in which methadone is cited as the sole drug used, those habits must change.

In France, where Buprenorphine has been widely prescribed since 1996, the experience is different. Buprenorphine is the generic name for a drug branded as Subutex by Schering-Plough, which distributes the drug in the United Kingdom. It is a partial opioid agonist, unlike heroin and methadone, which are full agonists. The effect of that difference is realised in the treatment of opiate addiction. As a partial agonist, Buprenorphine decreases cravings for street heroin, tempers withdrawal symptoms and, importantly, negates any effect if street heroin is used simultaneously. It also carries a significantly lower risk of overdose, especially in polypharmacy cases.

By prescribing methadone alternatives, it is possible to save lives and encourage the rehabilitation of addicts. Since Buprenorphine was licensed in 1996 in France, the number of deaths from heroin overdoses has fallen year on year—from 336 in 1996 to 92 in 1998. Clearly, any pharmaceutical treatment must be given in the context of other therapy that helps addicts to sustain their treatment and find a new life for themselves. Even if the drug was administered in a multi-therapeutic context, a degree of success must still be attributed to the use of Buprenorphine.

However, the use of Buprenorphine is not clearly endorsed in the Department of Health clinical guidelines to which I referred. That is because of previous research highlighting the potential for its abuse, especially as the analgesic Temagesic. Although a degree of risk exists, it is comparatively less than that associated with the use of methadone. In France in 1997, six deaths occurred among the 49,000 people treated with Buprenorphine. There were more deaths in the same period among only 2,350 patients treated with methadone.

An economic gain can also be realised indirectly from the wider use of Buprenorphine, through a reduction in the need for health care and a reduction in the impact on the criminal justice system. Schering-Plough estimates the cost to the state as nearly £10,000 per addict per year, but the annual cost of treatment with Buprenorphine would be £2,000, with some added cost for additional suppport.

In France, 300 heroin addicts who were treated with Buprenorphine took part in a longitudinal study that demonstrated a 70 per cent. reduction in heroin use, a 25 per cent. improvement in housing and a 15 per cent. improvement in employment. Other indicators are available that demonstrate a shift to social re-integration—there was a 14 per cent. decline in drug dealing, a 7 per cent. decline in criminal activity and more than 40 per cent. of those who took part in the study reported improved personal relationships. Such a relatively small study easily demonstrates how effective treatment of opiate addicts can provide real benefits to the individuals concerned and society at large.

I should stress that Buprenorphine is not the only currently available alternative to methadone to combat opiate addiction. Indeed, two other drugs have been shown to be effective—laevo-alpha-acetylmethadol, which is commonly known as LAAM, and laevo-methadone. Unfortunately, those drugs are not licensed for such use in this country, although their efficacy is acknowledged in the clinical guidelines. LAAM is now licensed for use in Australia and the United States of America. Because the two drugs are longer-acting, it is claimed that they are much safer. They can also be administered orally, thereby minimising the injection culture and the consequent risk from hepatitis and HIV. As the new biotransformation process proposed by a north-west research laboratory now significantly reduces the cost of production of LAAM and laevo-methadone, the two drugs offer not only a clinically effective but a cost-effective alternative to methadone. One thing is clear: we must stimulate primary research and clinical trials in this area. I ask the Minister to give his attention to that.

The French experience is remarkable but not unique. Another large study in New South Wales showed that LAAM and Buprenorphine are at least as effective as methadone, and safer. In the United States of America, a study of the two drugs conducted at the John Hopkins School of Medicine showed that heroin use could be reduced by 80 per cent. The market for methadone alternatives is improving all the time. In two years' time, Buprenorphine will be available in a form that includes Naloxone, which will greatly reduce any risk of overdose. It is estimated that 1,000 lives could be saved by the wider prescription of methadone alternatives such as Buprenorphine.

To prescribe Buprenorphine for the treatment of an opiate addict within the guidelines, however, a doctor must write 14 separate prescriptions for a fortnight's supply—one every day. That is because Buprenorphine, while licensed under the UK Medicines Control Agency and recognised by the clinical guidelines, is not included on the FP10 form used by general practitioners. Until it is included on that form, use of Buprenorphine will be unnecessarily hindered in this country. I ask the Minister to examine that issue urgently.

I applied for this debate in order to urge the Minister to widen the choice of drugs available for the treatment of opiate addiction, and to ask him to stimulate research into the discovery and use of other opiate substitutes that are safer than methadone. If the Government are to succeed in reducing drug misuse and associated criminal behaviour, they must take the issue of drug rehabilitation seriously. They must remove any barriers to choice, in a safe and supportive way, for addicts and health professionals who treat them. I look forward to the Minister's reply.

12.38pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on raising such serious issues, and on his thoughtful comments. I am aware of his personal interest in the issues and of the good work that he does as chairman of the all-party group on drugs misuse.

My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government take the issue of drugs misuse seriously. One of the key objectives of the Government's 10-year strategy, set out in "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain", is to enable people with drug problems to overcome them and live healthy and crime-free lives. That is why we will have allocated, over the next three years, an additional £50 million to health authorities and more than £20 million to social services departments for the provision of effective treatment services. The aim of any treatment, ultimately, is to enable the patient to achieve the goal of abstinence. We recognise, however, that drugs dependence is a chronic, relapsing condition, and that patients will need support, at times, when they relapse into drugs misuse after periods of abstinence. As my hon. Friend recognised, long-term methadone maintenance may help the patient to reduce or stop using illicit opiates.

Methadone is used internationally in the treatment of people who are dependent on opiates such as heroin. A substantial body of research supports the use of drugs such as methadone in managing dependence. For example, the national treatment outcome research study showed that both in-patient and community methadone programmes dramatically reduced patients' involvement in crime, and use of heroin and other illicit drugs. Furthermore, about one fifth of those on methadone abstained from opiates after two years' treatment. That shows that some drug misusers who enter methadone substitution programmes can abstain and are not necessarily maintained on the medication for long periods without reduction.

Prescribing should be seen as an enhancement of other medical and social interventions, rather than the sole treatment component. Support and advice on issues such as housing, education and training are important elements in enabling people to improve their lives and end dependence on illegal drugs.

We also recognise the other benefits of taking medications orally. As my hon. Friend noted, injecting behaviour, which is physically damaging, is reduced. In turn, that can reduce the spread of blood-borne diseases such as HIV and hepatitis B and C, which can be spread through sharing injecting equipment. Regular appointments with prescribing doctors and drug workers also keep drug misusers in contact with treatment services, and provide a better opportunity to meet their general physical and mental health needs. The 1993 update report by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs concluded that

"the benefit to be gained from oral methadone maintenance programmes both in terms of individual and public health and cost effectiveness has now been clearly demonstrated".

Much good work is being undertaken around the country to improve prescribing and dispensing practice. For example, we are aware of the four-way agreement in Berkshire, which links general practitioner, pharmacist, community drugs team and patient through a contract agreed by all the parties before any methadone is prescribed. The contract includes dispensing details such as supervised consumption and frequency of dispensing. The scheme is based on clear, commonly agreed protocols and a real partnership. It has at heart the needs of patients, but does not compromise the safety of the community and the professionals involved.

Although schemes such as this are very encouraging, we recognise that methadone is a powerful drug that, like any opiate, has addictive properties. Prescribing should not be undertaken without full assessment and regular reviews of the patient. Naturally, treatment should be tailored to the specific clinical needs of individual patients. That is why, in April, the Department of Health published "Drug Misuse and Dependence: Guidelines on Clinical Management", which guides all doctors on appropriate clinical interventions for drug misuse, including assessment, management of withdrawal and dependence, and prevention of relapse.

Those guidelines were drawn up by an expert working group and are based on a number of sources, including expert committee reports. We also took written evidence from professional bodies such as the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain. The guidelines were also peer reviewed, and all incorporated research was extensively examined.

The guidelines lay out the principles of safe and responsible prescribing to ensure maximum safety and benefit for the individual and the community. They state that, as a general principle, substitute drugs should initially be dispensed daily, which reduces the possibility of accidental overdose. In addition, they recommend the supervision of methadone consumption, which will help to prevent leakage on to the illicit market.

My hon. Friend referred to deaths linked to methadone and the percentage of people who obtain it illicitly, rather than on prescription. Although the figures are worrying, better prescribing and dispensing practices, informed by the clinical guidelines, will help to

[Mr. John Hutton]

bring about improvements. Nevertheless, I assure my hon. Friend that we are not complacent about what is a serious problem.

In addition to the advice given in the clinical guidelines, £12 million was distributed to health authorities earlier this year from the drug misuse special allocation element of the modernisation fund. In using that money, priority was given to the introduction of supervised consumption schemes, particularly in community pharmacies. The nationwide implementation of those measures should substantially reduce methadone-related deaths.

There are also difficulties associated with attributing drug-related deaths to specific substances. As my hon. Friend will know, many deaths involve a mixture of drugs and alcohol, and it is not easy always to determine the relative quantities of different substances, or which was responsible for the individual's death. The reduction in injecting behaviour resulting from the use of such prescribed substitute drugs will help to reduce deaths from blood-borne diseases such as hepatitis B and C, in conjunction with other harm-minimisation measures such as needle and syringe exchange programmes. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs prevention working group is producing a report on reducing drug-related deaths. Its findings will form the basis of a comprehensive action plan to reduce such deaths, which is a target of the drug strategy.

As my hon. Friend said, although liquid methadone is currently the most commonly used drug in maintenance prescribing, it is important that a full range of effective medications is available to doctors. We welcome the introduction and use of appropriate and effective new drug treatments, and we will carefully review evidence of their effectiveness. The clinical guidelines provided information on alternative opiates and other drugs used in treating drug dependence that were available at the time of publication, including Lofexidine, Naltrexone, LAAM and Buprenorphine.

With regard to reducing illicit drug misuse, criminality and risk behaviour, such as sharing injecting equipment, LAAM's results have been comparable to methadone. However, as my hon. Friend, who has a relevant professional interest and expertise, will know, it is a longer acting drug and can be dispensed less frequently. So far, it has not been licensed for use in the UK for opioid dependence, but it shows promise as an alternative form of treatment. Buprenorphine, however, was licensed in the UK last year for the treatment of opioid dependence. Trials suggest that it may have an efficacy similar to methadone 50 to 60 mg, and we are sure that it has a valuable place in the overall treatment of opioid dependence.

The Department of Health is actively considering including Buprenorphine in the list of drugs on the special prescription form to which my hon. Friend referred. That form enables doctors to prescribe the dispensing of drugs on one prescription in daily instalments for up to a fortnight. My hon. Friend asked me to consider prescription on an instalment basis, and the measure may lead to that. We anticipate a decision in the near future.

Like methadone, Buprenorphine is a powerful drug and not without its problems. It has potential for diversion and misuse, and it will not be suitable for all patients. It must be used carefully for patients with higher levels of opiate use, because it may precipitate partial withdrawal. It is also readily soluble, so dispensing must be carefully supervised to minimise the risk of injection. There is literature to suggest that, in other parts of the world, it has been used for injection.

My hon. Friend referred to the French experience with Buprenorphine. We understand that, on its introduction in France, there was considerable leakage on to the illicit market and substantial intravenous use. Furthermore, its use in the UK during the early 1980s resulted in similar concerns about safety and suitability. It is likely that only a relatively small percentage of patients who are currently treated with methadone would be treated instead with Buprenorphine, although some patients who are thought unsuitable for methadone may be suitable. However, we are pleased that another medication is now available to doctors in the treatment of drug dependence.

I assure my hon. Friend that we are not unaware of the importance of the issues that he has raised today, and we are looking at them carefully. He also asked for further research into other substitute medications in this country. There is a research base for LAAM and Buprenorphine, but most research has been conducted in north America, and we recognise the need for further research in this area in the UK. The United Kingdom deputy drugs tsar, Mike Trace, has confirmed that he will seek a meeting with the Medical Research Council to discuss research into alternative drug substitutes.

Although substitute prescribing has an important role, it should not be pursued in isolation. Drug dependence is a complex issue, and a full range of services should be available to meet all needs, including those of non-opiate users. Those services should include giving advice and information, needle exchange programmes, counselling, prescribing services and residential rehabilitation. Treatment should be carried out in a shared care scheme, involving specialists, general practitioners and other professionals such as community psychiatric nurses, pharmacists and general drug workers. That should ensure that all patients receive appropriate treatment and care, although we are aware that there are gaps in service provision in some areas of the country. That is why we have made an additional £70 million available to health authorities and local authorities over the next three years to enable the development of important new services across the country.

We are also concerned to maintain the quality of all treatment types. In addition to the clinical guidelines, the Department of Health has funded the substance misuse advisory service to produce a document entitled "Commissioning Standards for Drug and Alcohol Treatment and Care", which was published earlier this

year. We have also assisted the Standing Conference on Drug Abuse in producing a set of quality standards for treatment services.

Providing good quality all-round treatment is key to the success of our strategy. It is probable that substitute prescribing will remain a key part of treatment for many drug misusers who are currently dependent on heroin. Methadone's effectiveness is proven, and we are taking seriously and acting on the problem of deaths linked to its use. Although methadone is currently the most commonly used drug, and will probably remain so, we appreciate the importance of making available a wide range of effective drugs, including Buprenorphine. We remain open-minded, and would welcome other new substitutes that are shown to be effective in the management of drug dependence.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eight minutes to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 December 1999

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Oil Fabrication

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

9.30 am

Mr. David Stewart (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to deal with the important issue of the oil fabrication industry in the United Kingdom. First, I shall focus on the Barmac oil construction yards, some of which are located in my constituency. Hon. Members will be aware that more than 3,000 redundancies were announced in the yards. Secondly, I shall focus on the wider issues that affect investment decisions in the UK continental shelf. I am grateful that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe will reply to the debate. She has an excellent level of expertise on the matter and chairs the oil and gas task force.

I understand that a number of hon. Members may want to contribute to the debate, especially my hon. Friends the Members for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald), for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran), for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) and for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor). I am sure that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) and the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) will also wish to contribute, although that is a matter for you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I shall begin with some of the background to the issues surrounding Barmac. As hon. Members may be aware, Barmac is a joint operation, involving Brown and Root and McDermot's. Those corporations are the only two to have survived in their present form since day one of the development of the UK oil fabrication sector. They operate in Ardersier and Nigg in the north of Scotland and their work force statistics will give some context to my points. In 1998, the work force numbered 6,000 people and this year the average work force is 3,500. The work force are skilled, well trained and well managed under the direction of Don Wright, the managing director. They have a comprehensive list of skills, from engineering to IT, fitting, welding, rigging, crane operation, scaffolding and painting.

Barmac's annual wage bill for the highlands and islands is approximately £85 million, which is a substantial sum for the region, and it is the largest private employer in my area and north of the central belt. The joint operation is also one of the largest private employers in Scotland and, interestingly, it is also the largest steel manufacturer in Scotland. Historically, as independent sites, the two yards survived an industry bedevilled by peaks and troughs. Barmac is the largest trainer of skilled labour in Scotland. More than 7,000 people have received training from it, in a variety of skills. Currently, more than 90 apprentices are involved in training.

Oil analysts predict that next year will be the leanest on record for downstream construction work. The immediate effect of such changes at Barmac has been the loss of 3,000 jobs. That loss is a tragedy for the work force and for the families who are facing a bleak winter without a wage or job. Both yards face the new millennium with the possibility of care and maintenance costs and near empty books, which may occur in particular towards the middle of next year. If Barmac were to close, the effect on the highland economy would obviously be disastrous. The gross domestic product of the highlands and islands is already less than the European and British averages, which triggered off the area's objective 1 status.

The management and work force have not been waiting for the crisis to happen. They have implemented the CRINE—cost reduction in the new era—regime. They have also opened a dry dock, which gives them a lot more flexibility and for which they had more than £3 million of objective 1 funds. The beauty of dry docks is their flexibility, especially for the construction of floating production vessels.

The management have sought new markets abroad, in Canada, Mexico, Norway and Denmark, and have considered diversification closely, especially in respect of the decommissioning of redundant rigs. Such decommissioning will be an important factor for the UK sector, especially post Brent Spar. The key issue is when it will come on stream. It may be some considerable time before substantial decommissioning work is available to the sector. The management and work force have also looked at renewables, which are very important for the future of the UK sector and not just for Barmac. I refer in particular to wind and wave power.

The campaign to generate new work is very different from that which occurred in the early 1990s, especially for Barmac. In the early 1990s, the game plan was to ensure in the UK continental sector that work went to UK yards rather than to allegedly highly subsidised yards in Spain and Italy. Now, matters are different, and there is little work in the UK sector. The campaign now is to convince the oil and gas companies to bring forward their exploration and drilling work.

What about the wider environment? First, how much oil is there? That is a difficult question to answer. Many seasoned observers, such as Dick Winchester, the director of technology at the Centre for Marine and Petroleum Technology in Aberdeen, estimate that between 4 billion and 4.5 billion barrels of oil remain to be developed. There are also between 80 and 180 undeveloped oilfields. The problem, inasmuch as one exists, is that the remaining fields are very small in the scale of things. Do small fields and large companies go together? Many companies have said that their strategy is to develop much bigger fields, such as the one that is to be developed in the gulf of Mexico. Shell has negotiated a deal in Iran and BP is known to be bidding for 50 licences in the same area.

I am concerned about the UK block leasing terms, which do not provide any incentive to accelerate development work, as ownership periods range from 30 to 40 years. The earliest licences expire in 2010. First, my right hon. Friend the Minister may wish to comment on whether changes should be made to the block leasing scheme to provide greater incentives for oil companies to invest in development in existing and new fields. Such changes may motivate companies to explore and drill.

[Mr. David Stewart]

My second practical suggestion is that we consider encouraging the establishment of new, smaller companies with fewer overheads and more manoeuvrability than their larger counterparts. Such an approach has worked well in the United States of America, where clusters of small companies have operated a small number of small fields. In the UK, such companies would, of course, benefit from lower corporation tax. Thirdly, I believe strongly that the UK has no national champion or flagship operator in the same way that Norway has Statoil and France has Elf and Total. Despite being free-market companies, those organisations are highly supportive of Norwegian and French industry and technology. I believe that every United States oil company is a United States champion.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to initiate the debate, to which I know that several hon. Members will wish to contribute. I shall summarise some of my key points. I have faith in the UK fabrication sector generally and in the local Barmac yards. The yards have an excellent work force, are well managed and have world-class facilities. I regret the loss of 3,000 jobs, which is damaging to the fragile highlands and islands economy. I shall meet the major oil companies—Shell, BP, Texaco and Conoco—and my game plan is to bring forward exploration and drilling work. This morning, I met Dr. George Watkins, the chairman and managing director of Conoco and I thank him for arranging such an early meeting.

The investment decisions made by oil companies depend on a series of factors, such as the price of oil, accessibility and geology of fields, demand, level of resources and exploration costs. Perhaps the key issue is confidence. No one can force large companies to invest in the UK sector. I believe that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor kept his side of the bargain, as the fiscal machinery remains unchanged.

Perhaps it is now time for the oil companies either to use their licences or to lose them, although some people might say that I would say that. I want to quote from the September issue of *Petroleum Review*, which said:

"There is an established production infrastructure and a comprehensive construction capacity close to hand."

That is, in the North sea. It continued:

"There is a ready pool of skill, manpower, sympathetic government and regulation, and a ready market for all that can be produced. Taxation is low (the UK is the second or third most attractive regime in the world, Norway less so)."

We need to encourage smaller companies to enter the market, as in the United States, and to look at the development of a UK champion, as in Norway and France. Let us not forget about gas. Gas-fired power stations may prove to be an important factor and the Minister may wish to say something about the current moratorium on those.

The oil industry is a volatile, cyclical and global market, which has been dominated by multinational companies and the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. However, the harsh reality is that decisions by oil companies to mothball exploration in the UK sector condemn thousands of highland workers to the dole over Christmas.

9.41 am

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) on securing this debate at this particular time because all of us, irrespective of our party-political allegiance, share a deep concern about the implications of events at Barmac and about the long-term future of the UK industry as a whole. We do not need to emphasise the scale of the problem in human terms and the manufacturing implications for the highland economy—the loss to the economy that will result from the closures, or at least the mothballing or care and maintenance, whichever term we care to use, of those yards. It is important to remember that the arguments for objective 1 status did not take into account the cyclical nature of the industry. If we revisited that argument now, we might be in a better situation.

I am sure that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) and I share a sense of déjà vu because, on many occasions, he and I have taken part in meetings with Ministers, Adjournment debates and interventions on debates on this subject, throughout all of which we have tried to ensure a cohesive approach to this important industry, because it is the sole manufacturing industry in the highlands of Scotland. We were all proud of the work undertaken by Barmac in rationalising the yards at Nigg and Ardersier. I find it strange that people still tell me that there is an itinerant work force in those yards. Gone are the days of the Kishorn commandos. In the highlands, we have built up a skilled and dedicated work force, as we saw during the building of the turret for the Schiehallion field, one of the frontiers of the oil fabrication industry. We shall pay tribute to that skilled work force who live in our communities. I know only too well that, when Ardersier and Nigg are doing well, the small shops and hotels in the villages in my constituency do extremely well. When that purchasing power has gone, there will be a knock-on effect on the rest of the economy. In Moray, it is estimated that 500 jobs will go as a direct result of the announcements and that will have a knock-on effect on other sectors.

I am sure that we all wish to make this a contructive debate and that none of us wishes to score party political points. I want to raise one or two issues with the Minister, who chairs the oil and gas task force. Some of us have been arguing in the Scottish Parliament that there should be a general task force to consider the issue as it relates to the highlands and that the task force should include representatives from the oil industry. As the hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber said in his opening remarks, it is important to involve the oil industry in discussions because it has the technical expertise—I do not pretend to be a technical expert in these matters. It is important that, in addition to involving local enterprise companies, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the councils, we should include representatives from the oil industry, with their skills and knowledge, to talk this through. I should like a specific task force to be set up, as one was set up to deal with the problems at Continental in the Lothians and Kvaerner in Govan. That would reassure many people in the highlands, who still feel at times that they are regarded as being all tartan, haggis, sheep and granny's hielan hame, when, in fact, we have a skilled facility in our communities that we do not want to lose.

Such a task force should tackle some of the issues relating to research and development in the smaller fields. Much emphasis has been placed on the Clair field and how that might be developed. Can the Minister tell us what is happening with the Clair field development, what the time scale for that is and what the implications will be? Secondly, from her knowledge of the tax regime, can the Minister give some consideration to how some of these issues have been dealt with by the Chancellor? If we go back to the Finance Act 1997, we can see that the allowance for development drilling was then 100 per cent. If we could have an allowance of at least 100 per cent. for drilling, that might be an incentive to oil companies to consider giving work to our yards.

Thirdly, the royalty and tax system impacts harshly on projects in mature fields. A royalty relief, remission or reduced rate and/or some petroleum revenue tax relief for incremental projects, such as uplift on incremental investment or a petroleum revenue tax credit for such expenditure, could provide a reasonably cheap incentive. The gain in tax revenues from incremental projects might exceed the value of the tax reliefs. The Government would need permission to do that because the oil price is currently high, but I think that it would be extremely worth while in the context of the problem that we face.

In terms of dealing with the immediate crisis, at a meeting last week of all the Members of the Scottish Parliament with constituencies in the highlands and islands, the Scottish Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, indicated that resources would not be a problem if Highlands and Islands Enterprise, which is dealing with this with local enterprise companies, were to require additional resources. Perhaps that needs to be confirmed through Government Departments in England, because it is important. We want to put in place the structures that are necessary to retain the work force in the area. The Department of Trade and Industry and the Scotland Office must ensure that they work closely together, along with the Scottish Executive, to ensure that that will happen. Tomorrow afternoon, there will be a meeting at Ardersier with the Minister from the Scottish Executive and highlands and islands Members of the Scottish Parliament—I am unsure whether Members of Parliament have been invited—

Mr. David Stewart *indicated assent.*

Mrs. Ewing: The hon. Gentleman says that they have. I wonder what input the Department of Trade and Industry and the Scotland Office have made to that.

We do not need to emphasise the scale of the problem in personal and humanitarian terms. We should like a long-term structure for the yards in our constituencies—the hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber and I have argued that case long and hard. I know that there is a problem in the United Kingdom because skills are being sought elsewhere in the world, but we have a responsibility, as an oil and gas producing country, to ensure that we retain our skills and give people a secure future.

9.50 am

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) on securing it.

This is an important issue for the north of Scotland. I stress the north of Scotland rather than the highlands because what is happening in Barmac reflects events in the oil industry in general. My constituency of Aberdeen is recognised as the oil capital of Europe and we are also experiencing difficulties, although they are not as apparent as the fairly dramatic circumstances at Barmac.

I shall speak about employment in the oil industry and how we should proceed. The industry tells us that it employs 380,000 people directly or indirectly in the United Kingdom. That massive number of people reflects the importance of the industry. However, it is wrong to think of the employment as being concentrated in one part of the country. A survey by the Offshore Contractors Association about a year ago showed that 220 hon. Members in the House had more than 500 oil jobs based in their constituencies. The business permeates the whole of British industry. My local council estimates that 40,000 jobs in its area are directly related to the oil industry.

For 30 years, the oil industry has taken workers from all parts of the UK. When it began to develop in the 1960s and 1970s, the bulk of workers came from the traditional heavy engineering and manufacturing industries on Teesside, Tyneside and Clydeside—I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) is here to represent that interest—and that remains the case. Any day of the week, the southbound train from Aberdeen is full of Geordies and Teessiders who are heading home after two or three weeks on the rigs.

It is important to understand the nature of employment in the North sea industry, which includes onshore facilities such as Barmac. It is a cyclical industry. Some of our major economic crises in the past 20 years stemmed from the oil crisis in the early 1970s. At that time, the UK industry was in its infancy, but when the price collapsed from between $32 and $35 a barrel to between $8 and $9 a barrel almost overnight in 1985–86, industry in my area was devastated. It was estimated that the oil industry lost 50,000 jobs virtually overnight. Investment was immediately stopped and no money was spent on new projects. Drilling, exploration and rig construction were halted, although existing contracts were fulfilled. The industry suffered severely for three or four years, especially the onshore fabrication yards in Scotland, such as those at Ardersier and Nigg.

There is a particular culture to offshore employment that is difficult to find anywhere else in Britain. About 10 per cent. and, in some cases, 20 per cent. of onshore and offshore employees are directly employed by oil companies in my area. The remaining jobs are contracted out. A meeting in my constituency on Friday night was attended by 50 or 60 people who run one-person companies—IR35 companies as they are known. They are highly skilled, but the industry refuses to employ them directly. Instead, it prefers to take on employees through agencies or other contracting

[Mr. Frank Doran]

operations. That shows the way in which the industry operates: it demands flexibility. The other 80 to 90 per cent. are employed through single-person companies or other companies to fulfil contractual requirements—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not know who owns the machine that is making that noise, but Madam Speaker takes a dim view of such disturbances.

Mr. Doran: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

That practice underlines the flexibility of and the insecurity in the industry. The people that I was with on Friday night strongly wanted full-time permanent jobs in the oil industry, but they knew that that was not going to happen. In times of downturn—a year ago, the oil price decreased to about $9 a barrel—those people are dispensed with at little notice. They do not figure dramatically in large-scale unemployment such as that experienced at Barmac, but they lose their jobs as readily. However, they know that there will be opportunities when the industry picks up, as it is doing now—today's price is about $25 a barrel. The industry is cautious and there is little sign of real investment over the next year, so the problems will be with us until it is certain that the oil price is stable and it can make longer-term decisions.

The same culture exists in the rig construction yards, although they have managed to achieve some stability. They went through difficult times in 1985–88. Rig construction yards have been an important resource for the oil industry. One of the major failings of the industry is that it has not trained people. Instead, it has developed its facilities offshore and plucked skilled employees from other parts of the country, such as plumbers, boilermakers, electricians and engineers who were drawn into the oil industry as their traditional manufacturing industries declined. The rig construction yards were used as a training base. Many of the people who work in the oil industry were first trained in the yards. I suppose that that could be considered an indirect subsidy by the oil industry, which paid for the rigs, but the enlightened training policy at Barmac has been important in bringing new recruits into the industry. The oil industry's failure to train must be recognised.

I was pleased to hear the reasoned contribution by the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) who has a long involvement with the industry. Indeed, we have occasionally worked together on issues. Her speech contrasted sharply with the behaviour of some of her colleagues in Scotland on this issue. Fairly hysterical comments have been made in an attempt to pin the blame for the problems on the Government. It is important to understand the way in which the industry operates and I have deliberately spent time spelling that out. I back wholeheartedly the hon. Lady's suggestion that the Government have a role, but it is important to recognise that the oil industry also has a role.

People throughout the UK have benefited from the oil industry, with which I have been pleased to work closely in my area. It has created employment and paid huge taxes into the national coffers, and it has helped to build new skill bases, for example in information technology and underwater technology, which we are beginning to export. That will benefit us in the longer term, but the legacy of the oil industry is that there is little sign of any company bedding down in our communities.

The industry is in a long and slow decline phase. Oil companies in my constituency assure me that we have at least another 30 years and some have shown me the long-term plans that demonstrate their commitment. However, those companies are not making major contributions to the community. The perception is that they come in and take what they need in skills and Government assistance. They work within the system and buy what they need. I realise that they pay heavily for what they do, but they do not seem to feel a social responsibility to the areas in which they operate. There is a sense that, when the oil has gone, they will simply up sticks and go to the next great oil province. There have been a number of recent scares in that respect. For example, when the former Soviet Union territories opened up to western investment, it was strongly felt that, as the oil there would be a lot cheaper to exploit than it is offshore in Scotland, we would lose out on new investment. That has not yet happened, mainly because of the political difficulties in the former Soviet Union, but it could happen at any time.

In conclusion, we should learn the lessons of Barmac—as hon. Members have said, we have been here before. It is, however, important that the oil industry, the Government and local authorities work together. We must recognise the important contribution that our local authorities have made. Aberdeen city council is now recognised as a world expert because it has enabled its local area to make the transition from a non-oil, semi-rural economy, which relied on, for example, fishing, agriculture and meat production, to an oil economy. Other authorities in Mexico, Canada, the former Soviet Union, the far east and Australia are learning lessons from the experiences of Aberdeen city council. Local authorities together with the oil industry and central Government must work out a programme or task force to deal with the industry's decline. What happened at Barmac emphasises the importance of planning for that final stage.

10.2 am

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution to the debate. It is fortuitous that the hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) secured the debate, although all the hon. Members present—particularly those of us who represent constitutencies in the highlands and islands—would agree that the reasons that occasion the debate are far from fortuitous. Both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) outlined those reasons and I do not intend to repeat them. I would, however, underscore from a constituency point of view the overwhelming importance of Barmac's presence, not just the immediate employment, massive though that is—it is the largest private commercial sector employer in the mainland highlands—but equally the ancillary and spin-off employment opportunities and the social and economic underpinning that comes with them.

Although, as a result of redistributions, the Nigg part of the Barmac site is no longer within the boundaries of my constituency—it now lies just over the border in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan)—there is no doubt that over the years one could track, in constituency surgeries and the postbag, the fortunes of the local economy by the employment and contractual fortunes of the Barmac sites—the one is in direct proportion to the other. I fear that we are in for a significant economic downturn next year as a result of the recent shock to the system.

From my dealings in the past decade and a half with Nigg in particular—now Barmac—in its split site and various mutations, there is no doubting or escaping the essentially cyclical nature of the oil industry. One of the lessons that has been learned commendably by those at management level—aided and assisted by the trade unions, which have contributed powerfully and responsibly over the years—is the need for diversification based on substantial investment in forefront technology. The industry has done that to a considerable extent, but of course that in itself is not enough to cushion the blow that has just been felt as a result of the recent downturn in extraction activity in the North sea in particular.

As the debate relates to the UK in general and not just to the local situation—overwhelmingly important though that is to some of us here—it is worth considering the assessment that the United Kingdom Offshore Operators Association has made on likely probable developments as they affect the fabrication sector and oil exploration as a whole. It says that the most recent data from Wood Mackenzie

"suggests that the number of probable new developments is down from 45 in 1998 to 38 in 1999."

It goes on:

"However, few are likely to require major platform structures of the kind that will create major employment opportunities in the fabrication yards. Of the 35 proposed near term developments"—

they are only proposed developments; they are not yet contracts—

"17 are expected to use subsea technology tied back to existing infrastructure"—

so less fabrication opportunity there by far—

"9 may use 'not normally manned platforms'"—

more of the same—

"4 may use fully integrated platforms,
5 are expected to be developed by Extended Reach Drilling."

In other words, even with the diminished number of orders likely to come on stream and assuming that the price per barrel remains more buoyant than it has been of late, the changed nature of the technology means that there is less potential for the Barmacs of this world to achieve the huge fabrication contracts that have been their mainstay hitherto. That poses serious questions for the medium to longer term, leaving aside the fact that there are still several decades of North sea extraction left—I agree with the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) on that.

I am, however, critical of the Government in this respect. After the last election, when the then new Chancellor announced his review of the fiscal regime of the North sea, several of us warned that the fact that the price of oil was falling internationally was bound to add to the climate of uncertainty in what is a very reactive business on a global level; and, indeed, it did. Anyone who has dealt with the oil majors over the years knows that the business involves a great deal of brinkmanship—that is the nature of the beast. Some of the companies that announced in lights that they were postponing major developments may well have used the Chancellor's review as an excuse to bring forward an announcement that they may have been likely to make anyway; I am not so naive as to suppose that that was not so. Without doubt, however, the fiscal review, against the backdrop of the plummeting price per barrel of oil internationally, contributed to added uncertainty, which led to some genuine postponements, if not cancellations. That has certainly not helped the domestic fabrication sector.

There needs to be a twofold approach. First, there is the micro-approach. Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Government Ministers sitting in the Parliament and Executive in Edinburgh can attempt to cope with the immediate local economic and social impact. I know that they are trying to do that and they deserve—and will receive—all possible support in their endeavours. However, that is merely Elastoplast after the event. Action is also needed on the macro level, which is where Westminster comes in—the Treasury and the Department of Trade and Industry in particular. There is an argument to be made—we have been here before under Nigel Lawson's tenure—for fiscal stimulus as it affects marginal field extraction and development, not least the satellite technology around existing fields. The high rates of marginal taxation that are applied to existing satellites could be diminished to try to increase the likelihood of further fabrication contracts.

Our approach needs to work locally and regionally, as well as on a macro level, which is why it is appropriate that the debate takes place here, in the presence of the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe. I have had the opportunity of a brief exchange with the right hon. Lady, whose concern is well documented and whose interest and support are much appreciated, and I also met the Chancellor last week. At a time when the highlands has received such a setback in the cutting edge of technology—coincidental with our traditional sectors all suffering so severely, although for very different reasons—there is an urgent need for the Chancellor to consider in the run-up to the next Budget what tax stimulus he might be able to give. Nigel Lawson's actions some 10 years ago undoubtedly helped confidence nationally and internationally and the flow of orders that followed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should tell hon. Members that I intend to begin winding-up speeches by calling the Liberal Democrat spokesman at 10.30 am. Three hon. Members who wish to speak have caught my eye; if they are brief, I am sure that they will be able to do so.

10.10 am

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I, too, am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) for securing the debate. The name of his constituency might be rather a mouthful, but, unlike the more obscure name of my constituency, it has the advantage of naming the towns and settlements within it so that people know where it is.

Mr first point is that the oil and gas fabrication industry is not just a Scottish industry—there are fabrication yards along the east coast of England, even stretching down to East Anglia and the town of Lowestoft, which I represent. We have two yards in the town—the Odebrecht yard, which is part of an international company, and the smaller but no less successful KYE yard, which is a local company. We must remember that, in addition, there is a chain of small and medium enterprises that make component parts and supply engineering services which feed into the industry. All of them are affected by reduced investment in the North sea; the task force forecasts that that will fall by 50 per cent. by 2002 if no action is taken. That would affect hundreds of jobs in my constituency, as well as the thousands of jobs of which we have already heard.

The oil and gas industry is enormously valuable to our country. We have so far had tax revenues from it of £89 billion and, as has been said, 30,000 jobs offshore and more than 300,000 on land depend on it. I am told that investment in the North sea is equivalent to the cost of building a channel tunnel every two years. We are dealing with a hugely important industry.

The entire industry suffers from the reduction in investment, but those of us connected with the fabrication yards most feel the effect because the greatest concentration of jobs lies in the yards. The yards are vital to coastal towns up and down the country. They took on people from closed shipyards, just as the supply and standby vessels took on people from the fishing industry. Shipbuilding and fishing were the mainstays of the Lowestoft economy until the shipyards were closed and the fishing fleet was decimated. We are now reliant on the fabrication industry.

The Odebrecht yard in Lowestoft is in the centre of the town, at the entrance of the harbour. It is not big enough to build the jackets; instead, it builds the top sides and the accommodation modules. Visitors to the town often ask what those rising structures are. I tell them, and say also that the structures symbolise a barometer of the health of the local economy—while we have them there and while they move up, people are in work. When one project is completed, there is anxiety about whether another contract will follow. We live with that; there is currently less and less work to bid for.

The changes to the oil and gas towns are comparable with those that have affected coalfield communities. We are extremely dependent. We must not forget that real people and real communities are at the end of decisions. People naturally look to Government and ask what Government can do. In many respects, the Government have already acted—my area, like others, has been submitted for assisted area status and objective 2 European funding. It is important that the Government see the negotiations in Brussels through to the end; the granting of the status and the funding is vital to my area. Coastal towns suffer from being peripheral. We suffer from poor transport links in East Anglia. The firms and community of my constituency will need that external support.

I should emphasise to the Minister that it is vital, when we have those designations, that the oil and gas industry is able to access assisted area status funds and European structural funds—we have previously had problems with that. It is important that we encourage industries to diversify into related activities. They will need support with capital expenditure to do that. Lowestoft was given those designations by the Government as recognition that, for a long period, it had been one of the top—or bottom—10 travel-to-work areas for unemployment. The problem will be made worse if we also lose jobs in fabrication. I urge the Government to include in the urban White Paper being devised a special remit for coastal towns, and not just to consider the problems of big inner cities. Whole Government policies could then be driven in that way.

Gas represents a big share of activity in the North sea—our gas reserves will outlast our oil reserves. Why do we continue the moratorium on gas-fired power stations? Extra confidence would be given to the industry if it was lifted. I cannot understand why it was imposed, and I do not think that it is necessary. The Government declared that they wanted to reform the energy pool. It takes several years to build a power station; the operator of a power station would have to take the risk of buiding one knowing that there might be a different energy market once it was completed. It would help if that decision were reconsidered. Gas is the best fuel environmentally after renewables, which can meet only some of our needs.

We should consider what the oil companies could do. They were clearly going to be cautious when the price of oil was as low as $10 a barrel—investment was discouraged. The price has returned to $25 a barrel. We do not know that it will stay at that level, but I ask the oil companies to reconsider and to be more positive about investment in the new situation.

We must focus on the big issue—the macro-economic situation concerning the future of the oil and gas industry. We cannot alter geology. It took millions of years for the oil and gas to form, and we must accept that the North sea industry is now in its mature stage. The big fields have been discovered and, therefore, the days of big kit, such as big platforms, are over. The all-party offshore oil and gas group, which I chair, recently saw what might be the last such construction to be built at the Wallsend yard for the Shearwater project. That does not mean the end of our industry—we can exend its life if we fully exploit the smaller and more marginal fields. Thirty years ago, people were saying that the industry would be finished by now. It is not finished; it has not yet peaked because of innovation, technical advance and cost reduction since those early days. We must maximise the life of the industry of the United Kingdom continental shelf in that way.

The Government industry task force, which has been a model of co-operation between Government and industry, is addressing that matter. The Leading Oil and Gas Industry Competitiveness initiative, supported by

the Department of Trade and Industry, will also have a great part to play. A special section will study fabrication and how we can learn from the gulf of Mexico and get down to the cost levels of the industry there. We shall have a future if we do that.

Developing opportunities in recommissioning and decommissioning will also be important. In East Anglia, we are keen to be involved in those opportunities as they represent a great source of employment. It will be important to maximise the industry's export possibilities, as we are world leaders. The task force has set an ambitious target of a 50 per cent. increase in exports. That is difficult currently because of the high pound. One of the yards in my constituency told me yesterday that it was buying raw materials from Germany and Italy; if it used our raw materials, it would be uncompetitive when exporting the final product.

We must focus on innovation now because the window of opportunity is small. We cannot build satellites once the major installations have gone or have been closed. We must develop our industry now, while the infrastructure is in place.

The Government have their part to play in the actions identified by the task force. I am pleased that they have already acted by introducing more flexible regulations, modernising the licence award system and granting capital gains tax roll-over relief. It is crucial that the Government recognise that not merely oil price but field size will be the key factor in determining investment for the future. I hope that the Treasury will take a long-term view of taxation and realise that, if it can gradually be planed down as the marginal fields are exploited, it will help to stretch the life of the industry, make the fields more viable and keep more people in work. It will mean more overall tax revenues to the Treasury and enable good environmental husbandry of the finite resources if what is there is taken out when the installations are available to do so.

The Government have agreed to keep royalty and petroleum revenue tax under review. The industry must then convince the Treasury that any relief given will bring forward increased investment. It would help if the oil companies could show that they would respond to the higher oil price by keeping their part of the deal.

We must remember that more jobs are with the contractors and the suppliers than with the oil companies. It is important that the fabrication industry is represented in the task force, which is to be relaunched at the beginning of next year. It should reflect the whole industry, including contractors and fabricators, and also have a geographical balance so that all parts of the country have confidence in it. The trade unions, too, should be fully involved. It is for the industry to decide who it puts forward, but I am sure that ultimately the Minister can insist on a fair and balanced representation from the industry.

There must be a national effort. Oil and gas is a great industry, which has cast off the old image of being dirty and irresponsible; it is now a leading-edge, high-tech industry. We must all work together, remember that there are people at the heart of it and do everything that we can to maintain levels of employment.

10.22 am

Mr. Calum Macdonald (Western Isles): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) for securing the debate and for giving us the opportunity to contribute to it. As you requested, I shall be brief, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I begin by paying tribute to the work force and management of Lewis Offshore, which operates the Arnish yard in my constitutency. I was closely involved with the reopening of the yard in 1991, which seemed like a leap of faith at that time. The economic context was in many ways even less promising than it appears today. Moreover, whereas the Arnish yard had been operated in the 1970s and 1980s by large multinationals, the new operation, when it was restarted, was unique: it was locally managed and very much locally controlled.

Under that local management, the yard succeeded beyond our most optimistic hopes at the time. Employment was consistently about 200 people, largely drawn from those living locally. At times, the number increased to about 500 people, some drawn from outside, adding to spending power in the local economy. Sadly, the company is now in receivership, but it is to its great credit that it kept the yard active for what was, it transpired, the longest continuous period of operation since it first opened in the early 1970s.

As several hon. Members have said, the industry is subject to ups and downs. Arnish has been caught by the current downturn. Given the yard's excellent record in the past decade and the crisis elsewhere in the industry, there is no shame in its present predicament and I firmly believe that the yard still has good prospects for the future. The qualities of the work force are such that it still has a good chance of attracting new investment when the climate becomes more favourable.

In terms of that more favourable climate, a number of hon. Members have already talked of the need to encourage new development. One of the areas to which people look for new development is off the west coast of Scotland. That development will be technically difficult and hugely expensive, but the shift westwards has already begun. I am told that west of Shetland has the largest producing fields on the British shelf. It will be useful to hear the view of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe of the prospects for further development off the west coast in the next few years.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the importance of the gas industry. There are anxieties about the impact of the moratorium on development and production and it will be useful to hear my right hon. Friend's view of it. What has been the impact on gas development? It might be appropriate to have another look at the moratorium.

There is also the prospect of large amounts of work decommissioning old, redundant platforms, as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber said in his opening speech. The combined value of the work in the next decade and beyond is reportedly billions of pounds. If only a small part of it were won by the yard in my constituency, for example, it would generate contracts even more valuable than have been achieved in the past decade. Again, it would be extremely helpful to know the Department's view of

[Mr. Calum Macdonald]

how the decommissioning work might develop, how big it might be, when it is likely to start and the likely trend of development.

At the first signs of decommissioning work, British yards face strong competition from Norway. With the help of the Department of Trade and Industry, it is vital that we keep a close eye on the development of that market. An important task for the Government will be to advise and assist British companies to keep abreast of their Norwegian rivals.

The other big tasks for the Government are, first, to keep viable the yard in my constituency and all the other yards that are suffering, so that they continue to be available for future business. The second task will be to maintain the skills and training of the work force so that they can take advantage of any future work in the industry. A third task in my constituency, which is perhaps more directly suited to the Department rather than to the local economic agencies, is to assist Lewis Offshore in its pursuit of outstanding creditors, especially when it is owed substantial sums from companies that are based overseas.

I would welcome the Minister's assurance that the Government are focused on those tasks and that the Department of Trade and Industry will assist the Scottish Executive and Highlands and Islands Enterprise in pursuing these matters. The Government cannot create work, but they can help companies such as Lewis Offshore and the others that have been mentioned this morning to be ready to make competitive bids for work when it arrives. I am sure that such opportunities will come along and I am hopeful, too, that my right hon. Friend will continue to take a close personal interest in the fate of the industry, especially the yards in the highlands.

10.29 am

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): I am grateful to have a few moments to speak at the end of this debate and I am grateful, too, to my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) for securing it.

The Tees is absolutely distraught at the state of the oil and gas fabrication industry, in which more than 8,000 people in that area are employed one way or another. An impact assessment shows that, if the industry goes down, our economy will lose about £220 million. That is a sizeable amount, and it is creating serious trauma.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) stated that many Geordies travel to the north-east of Scotland on a week-by-week basis. He might have added that so do many thousands of Teessiders, who are boilermakers, fabrication workers, engineers and welders. We have a tradition of travelling to where the work is. The commitment of this work force is to work and they want to hear from the Government that they, too, are committed to giving the oil and gas industry a chance.

So much of what I could say has been said in the debate, so I will not repeat it. We have seen Kvaerner's Triton sail out into the North sea. It is an astounding piece of engineering. We have also heard it said that the industry is finished. That cannot possibly be true or acceptable. The workers have inordinately high skills. The industry is value added. We should not be allowed to say goodbye to it.

I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central questioning what the industrialists and the industry are doing. My goodness, was he reading my mind? Last year, the industry achieved record profits. It has had difficult times, but in the past 20 years it made record profits virtually every second year. My community wants to know where the payback is. People ask what is being put back in. What is that industrial community doing about it? What will they help to develop? The skills and the technology are there. The community is looking to the industry—to Kvaerner, Odebrecht, and Heerema, which are very large companies. We do not want them to run to the easy fields of Mexico. We want to hear them say that the shallow beds in the North sea are still worth extracting from; that submersible engineering and other forms of engineering are greatly valued; that the work force are valued; and that they have a commitment to the community, so they will stay.

I have had two minutes in which to speak. This industry is crucial for me and my colleages from the Tees, and for the trade unionists. I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me that two minutes.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am delighted that we were able to fit the hon. lady into the debate. I knew her late father well. He spoke with great passion; so does she.

10.31 am

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) on securing the debate on a most important issue. Everyone present would agree that we face a tragic loss of jobs. The impact on the local community, the industry and the economy of not only Scotland but the United Kingdom will be devastating, as hon. Members have pointed out.

Broadly speaking, what is happening is part of an overall loss of momentum in the UK oil industry. In part, it is due to the inescapable facts of geological life. Available oil reserves are now smaller and harder to find and they are expensive to extract. The marginal cost of bringing them ashore is also higher. That will have a fundamental and unavoidable impact on the industry in the coming few years, but there is still a good deal of life left in those fields and a good deal of investment still to be made.

Some significant facts of life must also be confronted. This time last year, oil and gas prices were probably historically at their lowest point ever—certainly well below what investment analysts had expected a decade earlier. That has a serious impact on the industry's profitability and the effectiveness and value of investment. The price of oil has multiplied two and a half times, but is clearly in a period of considerable instability. Gas is extremely cheap on the international market.

The industry has also to cope with the political facts of life. Here I join my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), who

said that the Government must look back at part of their record of the past two and a half years. The uncertainty of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's review of the fiscal regime left the industry unclear about the future economic profitability and viability of its investment in the UK oil sector. His acceptance of that review was a little tentative. In the words of a representative of the oil industry to whom I spoke yesterday, it was acceptance for the time being. This is not the basis on which long-term investment decisions at a marginal and critical level can be soundly based.

The uncertainty of purpose of the fiscal regime was somewhat compounded by another uncertainty—that of developing and exploiting alternative energy systems. The hon. Member for Inverness, East Nairn and Lochaber said that the yard had tried to look at diversification into wave and wind energy fabrication and construction.

We need steadfastness and stability of purpose not only in the oil industry, but in the broader energy market. The key to that is confidence. The industry must have confidence in its investment decisions, not least because it is a global industry and, essentially, perhaps the ultimate market-driven industry. It is not given to sentiment or to spending a great deal of time on its social obligations. Therefore, it is essential for the Government to supply what they can by way of fiscal and investment support and the stable framework so necessary to reassure that investing community.

I make two pleas. The first is to the companies to hang on in there and not give up on the UK industry or the Scottish oil industry. I ask them to have faith in the skills and added value that the Scottish fabrication industry and the wider UK industry have and can contribute to their profitability in the coming decades. My second plea is to the Government—and I want to leave time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for them to respond. I make three requests. Please will they give a clear signal about long-term fiscal stability and help for the industry based in and around the UK oil and gas sector? Please will they respond to several pleas made this morning for a clear direction to their strategy on decommissioning, where a great deal of investment and creation of jobs will be necessary in the future? Please will they give today a clear signal about how they intend to facilitate the diversification of investment into alternative energy technologies? The skills, manpower and capacity are there and, with the alternative sources of energy, we have a rich environment.

This is not the day for scoring party political points. I simply ask the Minister to respond positively to this tragic set of circumstances.

10.38 am

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) on securing this important debate. There is no doubt that the two impending sets of job losses at the Barmac yards at Nigg and Ardersier are personal and economic tragedies not only for the 3,000 individuals directly involved, but for the surrounding community because of the indirect effect of job losses there. The hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) pointed out that when the Nigg and Ardersier yards are doing well, the small shops and hotels in her constituency do well, too.

The reasons for the absence of new orders after the Elf Enterprise Elgin platform, which will be completed in March next year, have been well rehearsed. The UK continental shelf is now a mature development, with remaining reserves confined to smaller fields. The low long-term oil price—recent but temporary hikes notwithstanding—is also a major contributor. Exploration and appraisal drilling are at the lowest level since the 1970s. The 35 proposed near-term developments in the North sea are unlikely to be of the size and type to require substantial new rigs from the fabrication yard. According to the United Kingdom Offshore Operators Association, which the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) mentioned, 17 of the 35 developments are expected to use subsea technology, using existing infrastructures; so there will be no need for further infrastructure there. Nine use not usually manned rigs and five are expected to be developed by the new technology in drilling—the extended-reach drilling techniques.

According to the Department of Trade and Industry's figures, whereas development expenditure was £5.1 billion in 1998, it fell to £3.2 billion in 1999 and is set to fall to £3.1 billion next year and £2 billion for the following two years. Despite that, Barmac remains relatively optimistic about the long term. Its managing director, Don Wright, said:

"We may be down, but we are definitely not out".

He went on to say:

"The heavy engineering end of the oil industry is notoriously boom and bust and the bottom of the cycle will be reached by next spring."

That is odd: I had thought that the Chancellor of the Exchequer had abolished boom and bust, but obviously not in the oil industry. Mr. Wright continued:

"In a worst case scenario, we will be down to 400 next year"—

400 employees, that is—

"But we actually believe that we will have enough success to ensure that we are still employing 800 on average."

There do seem to be some long-term trends, which may be hard to resist. We need to ask whether the Government are doing enough to slow those trends down, or alternatively, whether they are making the situation worse. I pay tribute to the hon Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber for his energy in raising these important matters with industry and the Government. More controversially, his exemplary activity on behalf of his constituents contrasts sharply with the insouciance of the leader of the Liberal party, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West, whose constituency neighbours the Nigg fabrication yard. Although the hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber used his opportunity commendably at Prime Minister's Questions last week to raise the subject of the Barmac fabrication yard, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West failed to use either of his two weekly opportunities to raise the issue. Last week, he even made a joke and asked about the London tube instead.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) says that the Government are not to blame. The Government's approach, however, has been confined to establishing the oil and gas industry task force, now to be renamed PILOT, and Leading Oil and Gas Industry

[Mr. Nick Gibb]

Competitiveness, which is about lowering costs. As I said, the key question is whether the Government are making matters worse. The answer is yes.

The United Kingdom Offshore Operators Association believes that one of the most important requirements to achieve the goals that the oil and gas industry task force set itself is

"extending the life of existing infrastructure in the UK continental shelf. This provides a large potential for 'brown field' development—but the window of opportunity for incremental investments for maximum reserves recovery is limited. . . Currently, such incremental investments are discouraged by taxes as high as 69 per cent."

That 69 per cent. is made up of a combination of petroleum revenue tax, royalties and corporation tax—a combination that still applies to some of the older fields. As the hon. Member for Moray also pointed out, there is scope for the Government to reduce those burdens in the light of changes to the market and, in particular, to the North sea oil sector.

The North sea oil tax review—also referred to by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West—which seems to hang dangerously over the industry, has been put on hold. When the Minister said that the review had been put on hold, she referred to the low price of oil as the reason for doing so. Now that the oil price has increased, I hope that the Government do not intend to reignite the threat that the oil tax review presents to the oil industry.

There is also the gas moratorium, a policy implemented by the Government solely for internal Labour party reasons. It has resulted in higher than necessary electricity prices and carbon dioxide emissions, and lower than necessary demand for North sea gas. Even the hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) cannot understand why the moratorium was imposed: the reasons given in the energy White Paper simply do not stack up.

Three Government policies, therefore, are adding to the difficulties of the North sea sector. No one would claim that those three policy solutions could deal with all the problems in that sector, but they would at least be a step in the right direction instead of a step in the wrong direction, which is making matters worse.

10.45 am

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): May I join right hon. and hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) on securing this debate? He has been particularly active on this issue and those of us who know him would expect nothing less.

I welcome our reasoned and thoughtful debate, marred only by the contribution of the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), who gave a singularly ill-informed and ungracious speech. Several important points were raised in the debate and I may not be able to do justice in 15 minutes to the depth of some of them. However, I have been most impressed by the depth of knowledge and the local insights from right hon. and hon. Members and I will convey a copy of the *Official Report* of this debate to the oil and gas industry task force, which will be able to see the ideas and the passion generated in our debate.

Like you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor). She had only two minutes, but managed to say what many of us have been trying to say for a long time. I note also that my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) was trying hard to enter the debate, but was unable to do so. I shall seek to converse with him in due course.

I feel a sense of poignancy in this debate, particularly regarding the problems of Barmac at Nigg, Ardersier and Arnish. I recall many years ago visiting Nigg before even a sod had been cut in the grass. The scale of development there has changed considerably now. The history of the Barmac operation in the highlands of Scotland has been put into context for us. We are talking not about metal bashing, but about a major operation with a highly skilled work force. I pay tribute to that work force and to management, who are showing a commitment to the community. The work force are excellent and I know that recent decisions have not been taken easily. I pay particular tribute to the work of the shop stewards at Barmac. I woke up in the early hours of Monday morning to a report from Canada. The convener of shop stewards had been there to look for work opportunities for the Barmac work force.

In common with the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing), I am well aware of the multiplier effects of the yards on local communities. The hon. Lady asked about the possibility of a wider task force. She would acknowledge that that is more a matter for the Scottish Executive than for the House. However, I shall liaise with my colleagues in the Scottish Executive, which knows that it can call on my Department's resources to assist in this matter.

I have already met the oil and gas industry task force and I will provide more detail in a moment. I would like to announce now that the oil and gas task force met on 1 December and the main item of discussion was the difficulties faced by the UK fabrication industry. I chaired the task force and was supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish), who is also a member of the Scottish Executive, and by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Scotland Office.

Following that meeting, several plans were formulated. I have asked all relevant Government Departments and agencies to meet, with the facilitation of the Department of Trade and Industry, to discuss their existing strategies in response to the challenges faced by the fabrication industry, to formulate a coherent UK-wide plan to mitigate current difficulties. The Scottish Executive, Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Glasgow development agency, One North East and representatives from the oil industry national training organisation are to be invited to a meeting in the DTI on 20 December.

Picking up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber about industry champions, one of the great advances since the development of the oil and gas industry task force is the way in which companies operating in an intensely competitive market have sat around a table to examine

difficulties in the industry to plot a way forward. I want the fabrication industry to enter into that, so that we have a champion for UK fabrication.

Let me try to give some comfort to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South. Much of the debate has been about Scotland. Last week, I spoke at the Northern Offshore Federation, which has a major event planned for February next year, supported by the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. It will be a major showcase for the supply industry—not just in the north of England, but throughout the United Kingdom.

Many points have been made today about the decline in the UK continental shelf, but we must separate that issue from the prospects of the industry as a whole. That is what the oil and gas industry task force has been seeking to do. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) made the excellent point about the geological challenge of the UK continental shelf. There is significant change in the North sea and we must manage that change.

The Government's initiative in bringing together the oil and gas industry task force has brought about significant progress. The reduced world demand, caused not merely by the dramatic fall in the oil price, but by the changing nature of energy markets, has been recognised. Indeed, the increase in the oil price has changed the situation a little, too. I shall come back to that when I talk about decommissioning, which has been changed by the increased price per barrel of oil. The continental shelf is undoubtedly maturing and is geologically more difficult. It is imperative therefore to reduce the cost of operating on the UK continental shelf, but we must not lose sight of the opportunities for exploration, production and the development of oil and gas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber spoke about the marginal fields and mentioned that a number of licences have been issued for fields that are not being developed. One exciting initiative by the task force is to set up an organisation called LIFT, the Licence Initiative for Trading, which is a virtual trading market in licences. If a company has a licence for a marginal field that it does not want to develop, it can trade that licence in a way that has not existed before. That initiative will work together with other initiatives such as LOGIC, which stands for Leading Oil and Gas Industry Competitiveness.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) talked about small suppliers such as one-man companies and self-employed contractors, many of whom have fantastic expertise. I have seen some of that expertise. It is world-leading stuff, but often, because they are small, they are not plugged into the mechanisms of the large oil companies. LOGIC aims to deal with that and to ensure that, right through the supply chain, big businesses can see what small businesses have to offer. Linked to that is the industry technology facilitator. Many of the far-sighted technological ideas come from small operators, who lack the money or expertise to market them themselves. Through the Department of Trade and Industry, we will help both LOGIC and the industry technology facilitator to make sure that those ideas are marketed too. This is about putting a coherent supply chain into place.

The task force has far-reaching aims. It is aimed at ensuring that investment is sustained at £3 billion per annum from UK continental shelf activity. That should ensure that production remains at or about 3 million barrels of oil equivalent a day. It is about prolonging self-sufficiency in oil and gas. It is also, and this is the bit that I want to work at particularly hard, about a 50 per cent. increase in export in oil and gas supply products. That amounts to something like £2 billion in value. I shall meet the OSO board tomorrow to talk about export opportunities.

My Department, through British Trade International, works hard to exploit the opportunities for a world-class industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) mentioned that our industry is world class. We believe that it is possible to secure £1 billion additional value from new businesses supporting up to 100,000 jobs—more than there would otherwise have been. We recognise that there will be a decline in jobs. This has been a sensible and reasoned debate which has acknowledged that change. However, there is the opportunity for the future too. We must deal with the short-term issues that affect communities such as those in the north of Scotland and down the east coast of England. That is a key area for us.

A number of right hon. and hon. Members mentioned the fiscal regime. One of the benefits of the task force is that it has brought together industry leaders, and I include trade unionists as well as representatives of the Government, with the Chancellor. One direct consequence of that was capital gains roll-over relief. The industry can therefore discuss the whole fiscal framework for the North sea directly with the Chancellor, who will keep it under review. It is not for me to speak for him, but he is aware of the difficulties in the North sea.

A number of hon. Members asked what the industry is doing about this problem. I have also asked that question and, indeed, I put it to the industry last week. The reply was that the industry took a bad hit in the past year because of the fall in oil prices. I ask the industry now to show its commitment to the people who made it the great success that it is and to recognise the skills that there are in the North sea. I have found a ready response from the industry, but I will keep in touch and I will keep the pressure on too.

A number of hon. Members raised the stricter gas consents policy. There is an irony here. Two weeks ago, I was replying to an Adjournment debate about the coal industry and was asked to ensure that the stricter gas consents policy was kept in place. The policy was put in place to allow us to reform the energy pool. We know from the Queen's Speech that there will be a utilities Bill in this Session, which will allow us to put in place that reform of the energy pool. I do not underestimate the impact of the gas consents policy on the UK oil and gas industry. I am aware of that, as is the Secretary of State. We wish to give fairness, and not favours, to the coal industry and we seek to give the same to the oil and gas industry. We hear what the industry says about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) talked about the problems of Arnish. I am sad that the company is in receivership, which is largely due to a commercial dispute. The local work force are excellent—like the Teesside work force they are international and have transformed their abilities

[Mrs. Helen Liddell]

over the lifetime of the Arnish development. My officials will do everything that they can to assist the yard. The company and yard are well regarded and the management has respect throughout the industry. We will do what we can to help.

The hon. Member for Moray asked about the Clair field and a number of hon. Members referred to the need to look at development west of Shetland. The field is very difficult geologically. It operates in difficult weather conditions and is the only field awaiting development there. A large number of licences are involved. BP Amoco is leading attempts to align the various interests but, as to timing, we must take into account the serious environmental impact on the area west of Shetland. The earliest possible approval and contract award would be mid-2001. Regrettably, I cannot suggest anything earlier.

I listened carefully to the points that have been made. Hon. Members know that I am available to them at any time to discuss the difficulties that the industry is experiencing. I do not want to hear us talk about the decline of the UK oil and gas industry: we are talking about managing change from the UK continental shelf in a way that secures an oil export industry that is for the benefit of all of us.

European Legislation (Parliamentary Scrutiny)

11 am

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I hope that I have the right protocol, because, like many hon. Members, I am somewhat of a novice in that regard. None the less, it is a great pleasure to appear before you for the first time in this new Chamber.

I also thank the Minister for coming here today and for getting off his bus. I understand that he has been touring the country in it and that it is called Eunice—perhaps it should be called EU nice. I suspect that he will have discovered the European Union's deep unpopularity as he travelled in his bus outside the world of Westminster and Whitehall. He shakes his head, but he might not have visited the parts of the country that I and my hon. Friends inhabit. In any case, I welcome the Minister, who is off his bus and, no doubt, off to Helsinki. I hope that he will not sign up to some of the changes that have been forecast for the new intergovernmental conference agenda.

I hope that the Government will not sign up for more qualified majority voting and that they do not move into areas such as the European defence structure. In particular, I hope that they will not deal with the revision of the treaties, about which we have read in today's papers, because that would give the European Union some competence over our tax affairs. The Government want to limit the IGC agenda to matters that are called the leftovers from Amsterdam. However, my fear, and that of many of my colleagues, is that the Minister will not succeed and that the European Union will manage to advance integration and federalism at the next IGC.

One issue that will be missing from the IGC agenda next year will be the power of national Parliaments and their ability to scrutinise the European Union's affairs. That is a great pity, and the Government should seek to strengthen Parliament's role in scrutinising European legislation.

The European Union reminds me of one of the old London Routemaster buses which still run past this building. They were designed in the mid-1950s, at about the same time that Europe was born, to replace trolleybuses in the city. London Transport has a wonderful desire to keep them for ever and over the years it has re-engineered them in one form or another, keeping the same old pre-war design, which is totally unsuitable for the modern London traveller. The European Union is doing exactly the same.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): As a user of the type of bus that my hon. Friend described, I have just one question. Does he agree that the ability to hop on and off while the bus is on the move matches the flexibility that our party seeks in its dealings with Europe?

Mr. Atkinson: That is an ingenious way of taking the Routemaster further into the question of Europe. The problem is that, although my right hon. Friend might be able to hop on and off, it is quite difficult to do so if one has a child, a pushchair or some shopping, or if one is somewhat infirm.

Europe is doing exactly what I have described: it is repeating the mistakes that it made in the past. On the important issue of enlargement, the machine that Europe is seeking to build simply will not work.

The new democracies of eastern Europe, which we shall, I hope, welcome into the European Union, are relatively fragile. The countries in that area have not long had proper democracy. Their political parties have still not properly bedded down or coalesced. There is a danger that they will lose their enthusiasm for their new democracy if the European Union forces too much acquis communautaire on them. That is the great danger in the proposals for the intergovernmental conference.

The problems were well identified in the report by the three wise men—Mr. Dehaene, Mr. von Weizsäcker and Lord Simon. That paper is worth reading, if only because it identifies the problems very well. It does not, of course, identify any of the correct solutions. The authors stress that the European Union should find ways of connecting or reconnecting to the people of Europe. That is important for the way in which we scrutinise the affairs of Europe.

The present system is wholly inadequate to deal with the volume of rules, regulations and decisions that come out of Europe. I speak as someone who had some experience in the previous Parliament of serving on the Select Committee on European Legislation. It has now been renamed the Select Committee on European Scrutiny, although it works in much the same way. I attended a meeting—you may have been to such a meeting yourself, Mr. Deputy Speaker—at which we completed our agenda in four minutes. We had about 60 or 70 items to consider, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) will recall. We whizzed through the matters without any sensible debate. That is not to criticise those who work in the Department. Some of our most excellent staff work is done by those who have joined the European scrutiny process and who examine European legislation. Previously, those involved were largely retired civil servants who had rejoined us and who thought of nothing better than getting back at their masters. They had the knowledge to do so and they provided an excellent service.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): I have been on the Scrutiny Committee since 1985 and have seen quite a wide range of activity on it. The people on the Committee—I mean no disrespect to them personally—appear to have been hand-picked to encourage the process of integration. In the previous Parliament, the views of a significant number of people were well known to be favourable to the direction in which the establishment wanted to go. That is a great pity. We need to be sure that people in the Scrutiny Committee, as in the Public Accounts Committee, are intent on asking serious questions all the way down the line.

Mr. Atkinson: I echo my hon. Friend's comments. That is correct. I got some instructive figures from the Library about the number of pieces of paper that emanate from Europe. For instance, in 1996, 39 directives, 2,341 regulations and 2,806 decisions came from the Commission. Among the papers from the Council, which are more important, were 58 directives, 247 regulations and 179 decisions. It is totally impossible for our existing scrutiny system to deal with those. The Scrutiny Committee considers about 1,000 documents a year, which sometimes go round in circles, perhaps two or three times. It reports on about 475 documents and recommends debate on about 60. It recommends that 12 of those debates should be held on the Floor of the House. I have not discovered exactly how many of those recommendations are carried out. My suspicion is that far fewer than 12 of those debates take place on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I have had the honour and privilege of being on the Select Committee on European Legislation. I forget how long it has been, but it has been a long time. Is my hon. Friend aware that the Committee is supposed to approve directives, rules and regulations that add up to a couple of hundred sheets of paper most weeks? Does he agree that there must be a serious question mark in our minds as to whether it can have any value at all when it simply rubber-stamps hundreds and thousands of documents, which it is quite incapable of reading and studying and on which it is quite incapable of making any judgments? Even if it disagrees with the subjects of the rules and regulations, it has no powers. All that it can do is write a letter to the Minister to ask for more information or that the matter be debated in a Standing Committee. Does the Committee have any value at all? Is it just a front and a pretence?

Mr. Atkinson: My hon. Friend reinforces the point more eloquently than I am making it. I agree entirely, but I do not want to imply any criticism of members of staff, because we rely on them to make decisions on our behalf.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): I apologise to the hon. Gentleman because I must shortly leave on an urgent constituency matter. However, I want to interject one matter from the viewpoint of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. Following recommendations made by the Modernisation Committee in 1998, the Scrutiny Committee no longer only pursues bits of paper, as he suggests: it is entitled to examine related matters. That raises the question of the parliamentary scrutiny of European affairs as a whole. For example, the Foreign Affairs Committee, on which I serve, has in its remit the intergovernmental conference. The Scrutiny Committee went ahead without consulting us. There is a clear need to clarify the roles of different Select Committees, even if we do not go down the road of having a full European Committee.

Mr. Atkinson: No one knows scrutiny byways better than the hon. Gentleman. He put his finger on precisely the point that I was trying to make. There is so much material to debate that we cannot concentrate on the key issues. We do not separate the wheat from the chaff, and there is too much to deal with properly.

The gold-plating of regulations is an additional problem that occurs after we have dealt with them. Legislation may be nodded through the Scrutiny Committee; it may go through a brief debate in a European Standing Committee; but it may be thoroughly gold-plated when it eventually comes into force. The directive on abattoirs is an example. It originally took up two sides of A4, but the final version

[Mr. Atkinson]

produced by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was a book. My hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) knows all about that.

Mr. Christopher Gill: (Ludlow): I want to talk not about the abattoirs directive specifically, but about directives in general. Would it not be a good idea for Members of Parliament to see the original directive and compare it directly with what is translated into legislation in this country? Both documents should be made available at the same time so that a useful comparison may be made and Members of Parliament can see the score, determining to what extent the directive has been gold-plated by our own Departments.

Mr. Atkinson: I agree absolutely. There is still too much material from Europe for us to scrutinise it properly

Things can be done. For example, the Danes have a system that may be applicable to ours: Ministers are called before their scrutiny committee and must face questions. In essence—and this is the heart of our policy—we should be doing far less in Europe. That is one of the central differences between the Opposition and the Government. We believe that the only way in which we can scrutinise Europe properly and citizens can have confidence in their national Parliaments is for Europe to do far less.

The national Parliament—which voters elect and kick out—is one of the great safety valves of democracy. Kicking out the Government is one of the ordinary citizen's greatest democratic weapons. Without doubt, my backside is still smarting after 1997; that, however, is the nature of the democratic safety valve. If more and more decisions are apparently taken by an unaccountable Commission or institution in Europe, the public will experience genuine frustration at not being able to influence decisions.

One of the worst things for a Member of Parliament is having to say, "I'm awfully sorry, but I can't do anything about this because it's a European matter." In that context, it is depressing to face a farmer suffering genuine financial problems. Even if the Government wanted to help, they cannot because of the European structure. I urge the Minister and the Foreign Secretary—when he goes to Helsinki—to press the case for a wider, shallower Europe, which does less, but does it better.

Mr. Steen: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way: he will be doing so again to many of my hon. Friends, who have valid points to make.

Two matters concern me. Is my hon. Friend aware that the Scrutiny Committee sits in private? The public and press are not given an opportunity to learn about some of the directives, rules and regulations that it considers. For example, there was a draft directive aiming to change the technical specifications on farm tractor passenger seats to take account of the wide and varied work now undertaken by farm tractor passengers. Should the public not hear about those absurd rules and regulations?

Mr. Atkinson: That is exactly the trouble with Europe's image. For the majority of people—as the Minister will discover when he is driving around in Eunice—the image of Europe involves tractor seats, square bananas and carrot jam. Of course, that is quite wrong and damages Europe's reputation.

Several things must be done, apart from Europe doing less and doing it better. Europe needs some proper institutions and should look across the Atlantic for ideas about that. For a start, Europe needs an equivalent of the National Audit Office; the European Parliament could create something strong along those lines. Also urgent is reform of the European Court of Justice, which polices the single market and is of enormous importance to this country's role as a free trading country, but is ultimately a cumbersome and almost hobbled institution. The fact that French defiance in relation to the importation of British beef may take the court up to two years to deal with makes nonsense of the whole procedure. Substantial reform of the court is required, and that, again, may reduce the burden of material emanating from Europe.

The most important thing to set up is an independent competition authority, as outlined in a speech last week by my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), who is shadow spokesman on foreign affairs. We need a competition guardian to snuff out regulations such as those on tractor seats, thus stopping them coming to national Parliaments.

Mr. Steen *rose—*

Mr. Atkinson: Several of my hon. Friends wish to speak, so I would be grateful if my hon. Friend keeps his intervention short.

Mr. Steen: Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to worry about more than the lack of transparency in the Scrutiny Committee? I mentioned tractor seats, but the Committee has just approved, by the Chairman's casting vote, a £5 million grant enabling the 11 official EU languages to be learned by all member states. As a result, Lëtzebuergesch, the language of Luxembourg, can be taught in Ireland—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. It is improper to raise in this debate proceedings of Select Committees that have not been reported to the House.

Mr. Steen: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The item that I mentioned was considered, voted on and approved by the Scrutiny Committee, so it is now part of that Committee's legal arrangements. Surely it is not a secret matter and may be referred to. There is nothing wrong in mentioning in Westminster Hall an item that has already passed through a Select Committee.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Regardless of whether a vote has taken place in Committee, the matter has not been reported to the House, so it is not relevant to raise it in this Chamber. In any event, we do not want overly lengthy interventions.

Mr. Atkinson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I believe that the lack of efficient scrutiny damages the reputation of national Parliaments. If the reputations of national Parliaments are damaged, the reputations of

the institutions of Europe are also damaged, by proxy. A proper system of scrutiny is vital. The avalanche or blizzard of legislation that comes to Parliament cannot be properly scrutinised. We have to turn off the tap. It can be turned off by having a wider and more flexible system in Europe.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: A number of hon. Members have sought to catch my eye. The winding-up speeches, which will start with the representative of the Liberal Democrat party, will be about 12 o'clock, followed by speeches from the main Opposition and then the Government.

11.20 am

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): May I first congratulate you on your appointment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and express my delight at seeing you in the Chair for our proceedings this morning?

I come to the debate as a former Fisheries Minister who had a lot of dealings with European business involving both the Council and the United Kingdom Government, and now as a humble member of European Standing Committee C, which is the tail-end Charlie of scrutiny procedures before Ministers go to Council to agree various matters. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) is right to draw our attention to the volume of European paper. Anyone who goes to the Vote Office daily can pick up a yellow piece of paper which lists sometimes hundreds of documents on which we might wish to comment. It is difficult enough for us to keep up with the volume of UK legislation, never mind trying to keep up, understand, comment on and react to the volume of European legislation.

If we look at such documents, we are struck by one area in which our current parliamentary scrutiny procedures do not act. Our present system is centred on legislation that is making its way through the institutions of Europe—usually the Council or the European Parliament. When the Government of the day produce a White Paper or a Green Paper, we can comment and shape the Government's views before final legislation becomes cast in concrete. Any legislature always finds it easier to change its mind before it has come to firm and final conclusions. Our parliamentary scrutiny procedure does not cater for dealing with draft material. Given the volume of stuff coming from Europe, one way of heading off some of the material at the pass would be for us to become involved at an earlier stage. That raises the fundamental question of how to keep track of all the material.

I have been impressed by a publication which the European Commission makes available to Members of Parliament and the public, called "The Week in Europe". Two sides of A4 are produced, summarising some of the key events that are taking place in Europe. As a result of the changes introduced by the Modernisation Committee, the House of Commons has established an office in the European Parliament to try to develop links and liaison with Europe to keep an eye on what is going on. Over time, we shall develop an expertise in keeping better track of European business. In view of our electronic communication—the parliamentary intranet—we should start to develop the equivalent of the weekly bulletin that we have in the UK Parliament. In one document, we can keep track of what is happening in this Parliament. Sensible editorial control would help to keep us better posted about what is going on from the inception of a consultative document through to the passage of legislation in the European Parliament. However much we may desire to comment on everything, we cannot do it. We need more help to be able to comment on the issues that matter to our constituents. To do that, we need to keep better track on what is going on.

Even within the Scrutiny Committee, there is difficulty in keeping up with the volume of legislation. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham made that point. One of the new developments, which I welcome, is post-Council scrutiny. A Minister reports back on what has happened. I caught sight of a contribution made on 10 December 1998 by a former Treasury Minister, now the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce. In the negotiations on the European budget, a measure that would have cost the UK £500 million had been successfully fought off. One of the tasks of scrutiny is to help parliamentarians and the wider public to become better acquainted with the workings of the European institutions. I am sure that other hon. Members found it as frustrating as I did, during the general election campaign, trying to show that national Parliaments had at least some ability to temper the activities of the Commission and the European Parliament. The extent to which that can be done should be the subject of another debate at another time. To help in the process of educating people on how Europe's institutions work, the more we know about what is happening, the better.

I shall now make some observations about the way in which European Standing Committee C operates to highlight some of the difficulties that right hon. and hon. Members who are not Ministers or members of the Select Committee on European Scrutiny, have in dealing with these matters, some of which are extremely sensitive, and which arouse deep passions in our constituents.

In the end of vehicle life directive, for example, there was a point of detail that could have affected the future prospects of the TVR car company, which manufactures sports cars and is adjacent to Fylde. As a result of probing that directive, two meetings were arranged between the Department of Trade and Industry and the company to develop further some of the points of detail that Ministers were going on to discuss. That cameo illustrates one of the problems. We lift the scrutiny reserve in the House when we have dealt with a particular matter, but it is often only the beginning of a very long process. Sometimes the House returns to the matter, but sometimes it does not. We must become more disciplined about reviewing how Ministers are getting on as a directive or regulation progresses.

We poor members of European Standing Committee C are usually given about 10 days' notice about business, if we are lucky. The Selection Committee informs us that we shall be dealing with that particular business 10 days hence. As a result of a huge amount of work by the parliamentary Clerk and the DTI, a vast file of papers appears. We then have a limited amount of time to wade through it and call for other information from the Library to try to get up to speed on the detail.

[Mr. Michael Jack]

Every Department needs to make a major improvement in its explanatory memorandums. Too often—I also plead guilty—Ministers who receive a draft explanatory memorandum from their Departments give it an occasional look, but it is usually only a cursory glance. It does not contain the detail that is required to enable Members of Parliament to have the equivalent of notes on clauses, so that we can really understand what the directive means. Many directives and documents from Europe are written in a language that I describe as Euro-speak, which is a formulation of words designed sometimes to be flexible and fuzzy at the edges to accommodate 15 different points of view. It is difficult for Members of Parliament to understand the difference that should be attached to the recitals at the beginning of a directive or a regulation, as opposed to the body of the text. To know what it really means—in our language, rather than the language in which it is written—requires a better quality of explanatory memorandum and, whenever possible, a better overview.

The best that we have is the Scrutiny Committee's report, but that report is the distillation of the work of a group of people working under pressure of time. They are able to pose various further questions to be asked of Ministers; but, as we heard, they do not have the power to ask for documents to be revised or to comment in more detail. Explanatory memorandums should be improved to help us better understand and cope with the technicalities of European legislation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham mentioned gold-plating. That takes us into a wider area, which is further investigation on how Parliament handles statutory instruments. We have an objective legislative system; by and large, Europe operates a purposive system. We need to give serious consideration to that difference in our analysis of how we implement European legislation. We should avoid overdoing it.

The House has little opportunity to scrutinise the implementation of European legislation. At the risk of imposing yet another burden on ourselves, once a piece of legislation has been agreed in Europe and before we implement it, we might consider giving guidance to officials before they cast it in concrete.

Time will not permit me to go into more detail about what happens in the European Parliament. However, just as I asked for a weekly bulletin on what is happening in Europe, so I ask for guidance about proceedings in the European Parliament. We need to be better informed about our links with it. It is time that we had a directory of the members of the European Parliament, with their telephone and fax numbers. We should be told how to keep in touch with them and how to obtain information from parliamentary officials. We also need to know how to obtain more information and data from within Europe other than through the internet.

The more transparency, the more knowledge and the more contacts that we legislators can develop, the better we shall be able to improve our scrutiny of what is going on in Europe. The House must continue to take the matter seriously, but Members need more help and better information. I hope that my suggestions find favour with both the Scrutiny Committee and the Minister.

11.33 am

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) on securing this debate. It is a most important subject.

This is my first speech in this Chamber, but I must point out that we would all have fitted into the familiar surroundings of Committee Room 14. That would have saved the British taxpayer £800,000. However, the move is in some ways symbolic, because in recent years we have seen a complete change in the way in which legislation is imposed on our afflicted citizenry.

Many people believe that all law is made by their Members of Parliament. They are sent to London from the counties; indeed, apart from the first two Parliaments, which were held in Shropshire itself, people have been sent from Shropshire since the 1240s. They came with good ideas for legislation, which was initiated in Parliament. In close collaboration with interested parties, they worked through legislation line by line, scrutinising it so that, when it was finally handed on to civil servants, it was workable and had the approval of those affected by it and those who had to pay for it.

Another huge merit of our traditional system of making law is that, if the legislators get it wrong, we have ways of amending or repealing it. Our system for dealing with European legislation is an extraordinary parody of the Westminster original. Legislation is cobbled together in secret by civil servants, it is rubber-stamped by exhausted peripatetic Ministers in a secretive Council and then sent here for a charade of a scrutiny process. The House is not involved in the initiation of that legislation. I wholeheartedly concur with my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), who pointed out that we are reactive and ought to be involved in the making of European legislation at a much earlier stage.

On paper, we have many safeguards. A resolution of the House is always printed in the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee. It clearly states:

"No Minister of the Crown should give agreement in the Council or in the European Council to any proposal for European Community legislation or for a common strategy, joint action or common position under Title V or a common position, framework decision, decision or convention under Title VI of the treaty on European Union—

(a) which is still subject to scrutiny . . . or . . . which is awaiting consideration by the House".

One might think that to be a clear safeguard but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham pointed out, we run immediately into a time problem. Protocol 3 of the treaty of Amsterdam states:

"A six-week period shall elapse between a legislative proposal or a proposal for a measure to be adopted under Title VI of the Treaty on European Union being made available in all languages to the European Parliament".

Protocol 1 states:

"All Commission consultation documents (green and white papers and communications) shall be promptly forwarded to national parliaments of the Member States."

That puts appalling pressure on the staff in London who receive those documents.

About 900 new European documents a year are deposited in Parliament—that is 2,750 documents since the previous Parliament was dissolved. On average, the

Scrutiny Committee judges about 450 of those to be of legal or political importance, and makes a substantive report on them. In recent years, about 40 documents a year only have been recommended for debate, with a feeble 10 on average being debated on the Floor of the House. So far, in this Parliament, 83 documents have been debated, of which 15 have been taken on the Floor of the House.

Shortly after I was elected, I had the honour of being made a member of European Standing Committee A, but it has not yet met. It has not discussed any European documents since 16 June 1999. After the recess, I had the honour of being asked to serve on the Scrutiny Committee. I would have much preferred this debate to have happened a few months hence, when I would have had a little more experience of what goes on. However, my initial reactions have some value.

It is obvious that a huge responsibility and burden are placed on the Scrutiny Committee staff, because six weeks is an extraordinarily short time. It has only 16 full-time staff and one full-time Clerk. One Clerk is shared with the Deregulation Committee, and four Clerk advisers and two legal advisers are shared with that Committee and the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. Of the eight secretarial staff, two are shared with the Deregulation Committee.

My initial reaction to serving on the Scrutiny Committee was awe at the sheer volume of paperwork. It is clear that the staff are enormously stretched by that volume of work, and they are forced to make a hasty precis or summary of the documents that pass through the Committee.

The procedure sounds simple. The Council secretariat in Brussels sends a document to UKREP, the United Kingdom representation in the European Union. UKREP sends that document to the Foreign Office, which forwards it to the relevant Department, which then deposits it in Parliament. Documents should in theory be deposited within two days of receipt in London and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde said, the appropriate Department should provide Parliament with an explanatory memorandum within 10 days thereafter.

The staff of the Scrutiny Committee immediately hit a problem. Should they pass on documents and memorandums as they stand? Documents are often faulty or unsatisfactory. As my right hon. Friend said, the memorandums are not always correct. The result is immediate haggling and delay. However, that process is relevant only for draft directives. Now that we have co-decision, many directives are amended at some length and in some detail by the European Parliament. As a result, the six-week delay allowed by the protocol of the treaty of Amsterdam can be easily eaten up. Regulations go straight through, because they are not amendable.

Already the effectiveness of the Scrutiny Committee is gravely limited. It is reactive only and reacts to only a limited proportion of the documents that it has to consider. Sitting on the Commitee is a strange experience. We meet every Wednesday and consider what is, in effect, a summary or a precis of the original documents that the staff have drafted in haste under tremendous pressure. They do a remarkable job in the circumstances.

Receiving the papers is a problem. Sometimes I have received them minutes before the sitting starts. Although the Clerks have taken trouble to remedy that problem, the best that I can hope for is to be sent a slug of documents, probably half an inch thick, by Monday evening, probably with a follow-up on Tuesday and, sometimes, another on Wednesday, because the staff are under terrible pressure to ensure that the discussion takes place within the six-week time frame. That pressure is also felt in the Committee.

The Chairman, the hon. Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood), is admirable in his effectiveness in getting the business through. However, without divulging too many secrets, last week I passed a comment to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) and, in that moment, missed a couple of papers on which I wanted to comment. We are under pressure not to interrupt so that the documents are approved.

Last week, a document, which is now in the public domain—I do not think that I am breaching protocol—mentioned making the temporary ban on bovine somatotropin permanent. I represent the largest milk field in western Europe, so surely I should be involved in anything that affects my dairy farmers or makes them less competitive. BST has been used in Canada and America. I received the document only on Tuesday. I should have liked to have the time to contact the National Farmers Union and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals.

By chance, the next day I received a copy of an RSPCA document that made a good case against the use of BST and showed that it is not used in other countries. I have since contacted the NFU to find out its opinion. All that action was a complete waste of time; the horse had bolted. We had a three or four-minute discussion on BST, the document was agreed to, and I had lost my chance to have an input. The point is that we are reacting to proposals; we are not initiating them, nor are we applying our knowledge and having an input, as Members of Parliament have done through the centuries.

Mr. Steen: Does my hon. Friend agree that, even if we object, it does no good?

Mr. Paterson: That is right. We are involved in a charade of reactive scrutiny. At best, we may get Ministers to return to the Council, if there is still time, to put their point of view, but they are also under pressure, because of the great drive to ensure that the Council passes the legislation.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Is not the problem the fact that Ministers are not obliged to return to the Council even if they have the time to do so and whatever the Scrutiny Committee says? Ministers are members of the Government, who have their own policy, and whatever the view of the Scrutiny Committee—whether or not it is dominated by members of the governing party—Minsters will follow the Government's agreed policy.

Mr. Paterson: That is true in many cases. Of course, the attitude of some of the members of the Committee does not help. At one of the first meetings that I

[Mr. Paterson]

attended, a Government Member referred to an intervention made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone and said that it was not our business to make life difficult for Ministers when they negotiate on behalf of the United Kingdom in the Council, as though our role was to shut up and whiz the document through.

All parties are in favour of enlargement. We have a strategic and moral obligation to enlarge the European Union. Last week a report on the status of every applicant country was produced, but we received only a brief summary stating that the report existed. If any of us had had time, we could have picked up a copy of it from the Vote Office. After all, there is no point in going to the Vote Office to ask for a lengthy document that has already been agreed to and is a matter of only academic interest. The problem is worse than that because Departments are not performing as requested. They are not adhering to the 10-day limit; they are not sending documents to the staff in time, exactly as my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde said.

Annexe G of the Modernisation Committee's report on the scrutiny of European business, published on 9 June 1998, says:

"11 November, DfEE asks for three items to be taken urgently at the next day's meeting, because they will be considered at the Special Employment Council the next week. This has been known for some considerable time, but nothing has been said to the Committee."

That trick is intended to get measures through the Committee. Documents are held back in the Ministry, then released to the Committee just inside the six-week deadline.

Annexe G continues:

"17 November, Tessa Jowell writes about advertising of tobacco products, on which the Committee is due to take evidence on 19 November."

Her letter is addressed on the envelope to the Chairman by name, and is sent second class. It arrives on 20 November, the day after the evidence session. The annexe continues:

"26 November, Dawn Primarolo takes debate in European Standing Committee B on harmful tax competition; appears unaware of any difference between the Select Committee and the Standing Committee, quoting EMs that have been referred to 'the committee'... and assuring the Standing Committee that it will have a full opportunity to scrutinise future EMs.

28 November, John Battle's letter of 1 September on renewable sources of energy is faxed at our request. The original was addressed to the Chairman and never received. No Clerk's copy received. Existence of letter only discovered afer a subsequent letter referred to it."

Not only do we have an unhappy system of scrutiny, which is under terrible pressure, but the Government are not delivering documents to the relevant people on time as they are required to do under their own standards.

I shall refer to three measures that have dramatically damaged businesses and people in this country, the first of which barely touched Parliament—the introduction of the working time directive. The directive came into force on 1 October 1998. The then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, now Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, laid the regulations before Parliament on 30 July, but the House went into recess on 31 July. The House of Commons did not debate the regulations until 27 October and the House of Lords did not do so until 4 November. That shows total contempt for Parliament.

The working time regulations could be described as the most expensive legislative measure ever imposed on the British citizenry. The Government estimate that the regulations will cost £1.9 billion in the first year and £2.3 billion a year after November 1999. It is assumed that the enforcement of working time regulations could increase the work load of industrial tribunals and the number of tribunals could rise from 3,000 to 6,000 a year.

The measure has caused total consternation in business groups, to which the Government are supposedly so friendly. The Construction Federation believes that the measure would increase labour costs by 2 to 3 per cent. The Federation of Small Businesses argued that the measure would require burdensome record keeping. The Institute of Directors undertook a survey and found that only 3 per cent. said that the directive would help their business. Overall, the IOD said that the working time directive would harm British companies' competitiveness and ability to create jobs.

The Government's favourite business man, Lord Haskins, described the measure as "a dog's dinner", asserting that the Government had ignored the warning that the directive could result in a plethora of law suits. The problem is worse than that because the interpretation and implementation of the directives are entirely in the hands of civil servants. No mechanism for amendment or repeal exists.

The Federation of Small Businesses stated in its annual report:

"the major worry was that the final regulations were only published on 30th July 1999, just two months before they became law, which left many business owners unaware of the full provisions . . . Employers' understanding of the regulations was further affected due to the Department of Trade and Industry's original guide containing serious errors. The guide included the wrong formula for working out compliance with the 48-hour week and an arithmetical error in an example of night work calculation."

Ruth Lea, the head of the IOD's policy unit said that the measures

"impose costly new obligations and to make matters worse . . . business has only had two months to comply with the new regulations, some of which are far from clear."

That could not have happened under our traditional system, in which such slack drafting and faults in the original legislation would have been ironed out in our exhaustive system of Second and Third Readings and in Committee.

The working time directive shows how Parliament can be effectively excluded from serious participation in a measure that will have huge consequences for millions of people. The Pollution Prevention and Control Bill shows that, despite a Bill having been considered in both Houses of Parliament, all the effective discussion had taken place when drafting the directive, which reflects what my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde said. Parliament proved incapable of amending the Bill in any worthwhile way, because Ministers always fell back on the argument that the amendment in question was incompatible with the directive—directive 96/61, which gives enormous powers to the Environment Agency to

introduce virtually any regulation that it wants and to change the nature of certain substantial industries. In the other place, Lord Peyton said:

"I do not believe that I have ever seen a Bill which shows more manifestly a deep and profound contempt for Parliament."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 15 February 1999; Vol. 597, c. 471.]

Back in the real world, I received a fax yesterday from a substantial poultry producer on the Welsh border. It was originally thought that the poultry industry would not be covered by the environmental legislation. However, the effect on him is catastrophic. He said:

"The expected cost to our business at current rates will be approximately £100,000 registration fee and £40,000 annually thereafter."

He also said:

"Nobody can tell me what is involved and what impact this will have on my business bearing in mind we are meeting all current environmental legislation."

He is worried about the

"Cost of registration and ongoing fees being completely out of line with current agricultural cost."

I have received similar comments from the National Pig Association, which points out that integrated pollution controls were not conceived for agricultural industries, the pig and poultry industries being arbitrarily specified at the last minute. The National Farmers Union makes an even more telling comment in a memo to me on the integrated pollution prevention and control directive. It refers to

"the difficulty of interpreting European environmental directives"—

which brings us back to the issue of gold-plating—

"which are phrased in very broad and imprecise terms with no statement of how they are intended to actually operate. This contrasts with UK legislation whch tends to be much more precise and detailed, and is backed by formal government guidance as to the intention of how the details should operate."

The memo ends by stating:

"A significant problem with European environmental legislation is that where unintended or unanticipated effects arise, changes can only be implemented where member states are unanimous. This means that for practical purposes, most mistakes or unintended consequences cannot be remedied. The Commission's zealous attitude towards compliance with the letter of the law means that the financial consequences of mistakes or unintended consequences from European environmental legislation tend to fully impact on the affected sectors. In combination with UK legislation requiring the costs of regulation to be fully recovered from industry, this means that in the agricultural sector farmers bear the full financial consequences of deficiencies in the drafting of European environmental legislation."

Two critical points should be made. First, there is no means of repeal or amendment; and, secondly, hon. Members have no say in the implementation of such hugely costly and vindictive measures for our constituents.

Even more bizarrely, the new system allows laws that all three parties oppose to be imposed on this country. As topical examples, I would cite droit de suite and the withholding tax, on which the Scrutiny Commitee has touched. There is no demand for the former in the art world—I should declare an interest, as my wife works for Sotheby's—and it could cost the art world £68 million in revenues. The auction trade will disappear to New York, because works of art are easily transported. The latter could have a catastrophic effect on the City of London and could change the nature of the south of England. Bizarrely, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative party all oppose it. As I said at the beginning, we are reacting to legislation initiated in another place, and we have no role in the initiation procedure.

The Scrutiny Committee's report was taken up by the Modernisation Commiittee. Improvements have been made, the terms of reference have been expanded, and Ministers are now required to report before and after Council meetings, although we have had the pleasure of seeing only one Minister, who sits before us.

Select Committees should have a much stronger role to enable them to call Ministers before and after Council meetings. The big democratic hole is that Council meetings are held in secret. It was a pity that the proposal for five Standing Committees was reduced to three, but, having sat on one, I realise that they do not change anything. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde said, hon. Members can listen to a long debate, go to the Library and mug up after 10 days, but after the vote. The Minister returns to the Council and nothing is changed. It is shameful that the Government's business managers rejected the Scrutiny Committee's recommendation that measures proposed to be debated on the Floor of the House should be, and that a special motion should be necessary to enable them to be debated in Committee.

The real place for reform is Brussels, at the time of initiation. It is entirely positive that we have now established a parliamentary office in Brussels and that Members of Parliament should be involved at the very earliest stage, when legislation is being drafted. Once legislation has gone to the Council, it is almost invariably too late. MPs should work very closely with that new office—which is independent of UKREP—on the development of legislation from the beginning.

If a measure presented to the House were subject to a free vote, and 100 Members opposed it, that should constitute a veto, and the Minister should not be allowed to propose the measure in the Council. I cannot conceive of a stronger weapon than for the Minister to go to Brussels next week to discuss the withholding tax and say that 100 Members of the oldest continuously running Parliament in western civilization had voted in a free vote against it. That would concur with the Modernisation Committee's summary:

"We agree with the Government that any review of the Scrutiny system should strengthen the role of Parliament, improve democratic oversight, and increase transparency and Parliamentary awareness."

That should be debated at the IGC and built into the next treaty.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I fear that the next speaker will be the last before the winding-up speeches, unless those who are winding up for the Liberal Democrats or for the official Opposition are prepared to donate some of their time.

11.57 am

Mr. William Cash (Stone): After 15 years on the Scrutiny Committee, this is the first opportunity that I have had to speak in such a debate, and I have three

[Mr. William Cash]

minutes, if I am lucky. Having said that, I am sure that hon. Members who have not yet spoken will be good enough to take account of the fact that I have accumulated a certain amount of experience and anxiety, as well as judgment, on the scrutiny of European legislation and its impact on our constituents.

The fundamental question is who governs us and how. The scrutiny of legislation is the result of the system that has evolved since we entered the European Community in 1972 and is at the heart of the future conduct of our parliamentary system. I am sure that we shall need another opportunity to consider the matter.

I speak as one who took a fairly active part in resisting encroachments on our national sovereignty under the previous Government, and who regards the matter as one of national interest rather than exclusively of party politics. I am woefully aware of the resistance on the part of Governments of all shapes, sizes and varieties to any attempt to scrutinise effectively and amend legislation that emanates from the system that has evolved since 1972 for the United Kingdom. I had to cross-examine the Leader of the House of the previous Parliament on resistance to holding important debates on the Floor of the House, and got absolutely nowhere. The same applies to this Government and the current Leader of the House.

There is a serious resistance to holding proper debates on European legislation, because the Government want to manipulate it. We wanted to debate fisheries in the previous Parliament, but we were refused. There was no doubt whatever in my mind that the delivery of the papers in relation to fisheries and matters concerned with monetary union was orchestrated so that the minimum amount of time would be available, and so that decisions would be taken in the Council of Ministers at a time that would preclude our being able to organise debates on the Floor of the House. The issue relates to the manner in which the Leader of the House organises business in conjunction with the Whips.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) mentioned the free vote, an issue that I raised in a previous debate. If we are to be governed in a democratic system in which the people of this country have confidence, it seems absolutely fundamental that they should not have laws imposed on them under section 2 of the European Communities Act 1972 without those laws being properly scrutinised after the Council of Ministers has considered them. There should also be a verifiable pre-Council system to give the people of this country confidence that, if enough Members of Parliament resist the Council's proposals, there will be an opportunity at the avant-projet stage to consider them on the Floor of the House, in the national interest and without regard to the whipping system.

I am being blunt about that. In the words of Lord Hailsham, we are faced with an elective dictatorship, and it is made much worse by the introduction of the European aspect. We have an elective dictatorship not only in terms of legislation that comes through the British Cabinet, in the name of the electorate and those elected in general elections who represent and are accountable to them, but in terms of the majority voting of other countries, which denies us any real means to put up some resistance or serious diversion of the proposals.

If we argue, as we did in Amsterdam on the declaration on national Parliaments, that those Parliaments have an important role to play, it is axiomatic that muscles should be provided to enable them to have a free vote. If that were laid down by Standing Orders, as it should be, the Whips would be in breach of parliamentary procedures and privilege if they put pressure on hon. Members to vote in a specific way.

That may seem radical, although perhaps only to the Whips Office. I suggest that the same rules should apply as normally apply to Select Committees. We are dealing with a cascade of legislation over which we have increasingly less control. If 100 or 150 Members of Parliament tabled a motion, a free vote should be allowed under Standing Orders. We would then have a proper and effective means of demonstrating that the veto must be used in such circumstances.

I propose a fundamental and radical solution. It is essential for us to remember that what was relevant in 1972 is not relevant now. We have had a vast engagement in European government since the Maastricht treaty, which was why I opposed it so vigorously. Now we have the Amsterdam treaty and a new IGC to come.

I do not buy the argument that we are not in European government yet. We are. We have to stand up for our constituents in the national Parliament, and we should devise procedures that will be effective in dealing with European government. We must not merely end up with a talking shop.

12.4 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) on securing what is an apposite debate, coming shortly before the Helsinki meeting. It is also an appropriate time to reconsider the seventh report of the Scrutiny Committee, which has changed some of our procedures. Many of us think that it has not gone far enough.

I did not feel, however, that the hon. Gentleman developed the theme of the effect of scrutiny to any great extent. I am indebted to the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), who addressed the issue of how we effectively or otherwise scrutinise European business. The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) was not entirely generous to his colleagues in his use of time, but he amply demonstrated the difficulties that he has experienced in keeping pace with European scrutiny.

What do we want in a system for Parliament to do its job effectively? We need to be able to scrutinise the vast quantity of material that emerges from the European Union—I agree with the hon. Member for Hexham that there is far too much of it. We must deal with the legislation effectively before it becomes part of British law.

As the right hon. Member for Fylde mentioned, we should also consider effectively the pre-legislation material, such as the draft directives. We need to see what is coming down the track. If we do not do so at that

stage, as a Parliament we have no means of influencing decisions taken or positions adopted on behalf of this country by the Government. We must also consider the foreign policy aspects and the diplomatic interface that we have with our European partners.

Effective scrutiny and information are required so that all hon. Members—not merely those involved in the relevant Committees—have access to information that they need to do their jobs on behalf of their constituents and to be aware of events. We must have intelligence as to what happens elsewhere. We need to know not only what is proposed by Ministers in this Parliament, but what other Parliaments say about legislation and what is likely to appear before us in future. Too often, we react to proposals far too late, rather than being proactive in taking positions of our own or influencing decisions at an early stage.

We need to know what Her Majesty's Government's intentions are in negotiating on our behalf. We must be able to judge their performance in meeting their intentions as stated before a Council meeting.

The mechanism to scrutinise foreign policy effectively is provided through the Foreign Affairs Committee, of which I was pleased to be a member for some time. Its position should be clarified, vis-a-vis other Committees. The consideration of the presidency's intentions and the proceedings of the European Council should clearly be matters for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its Committee.

The new Scrutiny Committees are rightly constituted to consider the details of legislation but are far too general in scope. They are built on the architectural notion of Europe's three pillars, which I dislike and which is not what the Modernisation Committee first recommended. It suggested that the Scrutiny Committees be closely focused on specific subject matters. If that were so, they would do their job much more effectively. They are overwhelmed by a mass of material on which they cannot be expert. Can there be appropriate scrutiny of, for instance, the detailed agricultural measures proposed by the European Union in a Committee that has so many other responsibilities?

There is a danger of ghettoising European issues in establishing Scrutiny Committees to do the job. Many hon. Members do not have the privilege of serving on them, so they become something that merely involves someone else. That is not a satisfactory way in which to proceed. We need a much clearer mechanism than that to ensure that matters are discussed fully on the Floor of the House. When certain matters are of concern to a wide range of hon. Members, it should be for Parliament, not for Ministers, to decide whether they are debated by the House. There should be a better mechanism by which such decisions are taken.

One of the main problems concerning information is filtering the quantity of material so that we have in a digest form that which is relevant to our business as Members of Parliament. I agree with the right hon. Member for Fylde: something along the lines of the regular publication "The Week in Europe" would be of enormous help to us. The parliamentary office in Brussels must be one of the best kept secrets in the House. It is almost as though it had been considered to be exempt material under the Freedom of Information Bill. Few hon. Members know of the existence of that new office, and even fewer know how to access it. I know that it exists, but I do not have the slightest idea how to access information from it, or to relay information to it. It needs to be publicised much better than it has been and there must be a more transparent mechanism for getting in touch with it.

It is absolutely essential that, before Ministers attend Councils of Ministers, they give an account to Parliament about what they are to discuss and report back after those discussions have taken place. We must have the option of interrogation. I am no longer a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, but I remember when that Committee interrogated the Foreign Secretary. Such action has not become commonplace by the Scrutiny Committees. Our proceedings in Westminster Hall give us more scope in how to work out ways in which to present such matters to Parliament and will allow for a wider position to be taken.

If the subsidiarity protocols are to mean anything, the House must occasionally be able to affirm the principle of subsidiarity and say that a matter is one on which it wants to make a decision. If we do not have the mechanisms for property scrutiny, Parliament cannot do that and we will be less well served as a result.

12.12 pm

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) on securing this debate and other right hon. and hon. Friends for their powerful contributions to it, some of which I shall refer to in my remarks. Important issues have been raised that affect all hon. Members because they concern the effectiveness of the House and our role in it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) said, it is a question of who governs us and how. It is also important to recognise that that issue is becoming more important as the volume of regulation and directives from the European Union increases.

In Amsterdam, the Government surrendered our veto in 16 areas and it is evident that they propose in the next treaty to surrender our veto in a further 19. As a result, as Mr. Prodi, the President of the Commission, said, qualified majority voting will become the norm. It was interesting that, in last week's European debate, the Foreign Secretary said that majority voting was already the rule in the European Union.

Given that many proposed directives are being cooked up in the Commission, the volume of regulations and directives from Brussels will increase, not diminish, in the next two years to a new high, so how we scrutinise, get ahead of, examine and discuss those new regulations and laws more openly with people throughout the country is fundamental. Let us remember that there is a substantial democratic deficit in that regard.

The Minister will no doubt have experienced on his bus trips the widespread disillusionment that is felt in the business community about the whole conduct of regulation from Brussels. Regulatory issues for small and large businesses, as I know from my experience, pose a bigger problem than any other matter that concerns the future of the European Union. A poll published in the *Financial Times* last week showed that 51 per cent. of the population would like to withdraw from the European Union—an opinion that we should

[Mr. Archie Norman]

take extremely seriously. A complete failure of the democratic process to scrutinise and examine European legislation is part of the reason for that disillusionment.

How Governments of both parties have implemented European legislation leaves much to be desired. My hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) referred graphically to examples when this House failed the country because of its inability to examine in detail regulations and directives as they are proposed. Our standard of implementation is poor. We have a global reputation for gold-plating, which is nothing to be proud of; it has affected small businesses, jobs and individuals. The problem is not confined to Conservative Members. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) made an extremely insightful and thoughtful speech and I agree with much of what he said.

It is also true that Ministers have previously expressed concern about the matter. I wish to cite one example. Six months ago, in his Jean Monnet lecture, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry gave a commitment and stated specifically:

> "I want to see all new European regulation independently appraised for its impact on small businesses and certified as being small business friendly. I think this would make a real difference to small businesses here and in the whole of Europe."

Most of us—both Government and Opposition Members—would endorse this view. Given the fact that six months have now elapsed and that we have heard precious little since then, I hope that the Minister will tell us what progress has been made towards the establishment of that independent appraisal process.

Although our parliamentary process is often held up as a model of modern western democracy, in the area of European legislation, which now accounts for a large proportion of total new regulation in Britain, the record is poor and is arguably worse than in some other member states. For example, Denmark and Sweden have adopted the approach of ensuring that they are more proactive and that their Parliaments can get ahead of the regulation as opposed to reacting to it after it has been passed.

Serious questions have been raised in the debate by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), as well as by my hon. Friends the Members for North Shropshire and for Stone about the workings of the Scrutiny Committee and Standing Committees and I hope that the Minister will deal with them specifically in his response. It is hard to avoid the impression that the whole process adds up to regulation by stealth and is tantamount to contempt for parliamentary practice. We have heard about the failure to debate important issues on the Floor of the House and to provide papers in advance of discussion and adequate briefings. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire said, the process is close to a charade and degenerates to a farce.

I trust that the Minister will address such matters seriously and that he will depart from the prepared text that is in front of him. Important questions have been asked, and to refresh his memory I shall summarise some of them. What steps will he take to strengthen the role and effectiveness of the House of Commons in the context of enlargement and the forthcoming increase in European regulations? Given the institutional changes in Europe, now is a good time to deal with that. What assurances can he give us that the inadequacies of the scrutiny process will be dealt with? How will he address the need for a better mechanism for getting issues on to the Floor of the House? What is being done to implement the commitment of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to hold a business-friendly audit of EU regulation?

Will the Minister deal with the serious proposals raised by my hon. Friends the Members for North Shropshire and for Stone for pre-discussion and proper scrutiny of our negotiating position prior to meetings of the Council of Ministers and provide us with a better opportunity to hold Ministers to account for their conduct at the Council of Ministers? What will he do to encourage more openness in the conduct of the Council of Ministers and in the publication of voting records, agendas and so forth? Will he demonstrate a greater appetite to address seriously such issues than he has been able to do in the past few weeks? We appreciate that he has been on a bus trip around Europe and we much enjoyed the ribald remarks that he made in previous debates about that, about European issues and about my business career, but the time has come for him to deal specifically with the issues that we have raised. They are fundamental and I hope that he will respond to them.

12.20 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): As this is my first appearance in this new Chamber, I welcome you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the Chair and congratulate you on your appointment.

The debate has been good, and I do not usually attract the amount of support that is present today when I make winding-up speeches. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) on his good fortune in securing the debate. As with all European debates, the Eurostars—or perhaps I should call them the anti-Eurostars—are present, including the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). For him, Europe and the world are not enough, and he often comes to debates such as this one to remind us of his experience. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) is also present. I am sorry that he was unable to participate in the debate, as I had looked forward to hearing his remarks. We also heard a contribution from another noted participant in debates such as this, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), who has unfortunately had to leave.

I shall come to other hon. Members' comments in a moment. I should restate at the outset the Government's position on Europe and the scrutiny of European legislation. I think that we all accept that Britain's position in Europe is hugely important and that decisions made at EU level have an impact on us all. That is why parliamentary scrutiny of EU legislation is so important, and why I welcome this debate. Parliament must be promptly and fully informed about European legislation and about the Government's approach to the imminent negotiations—I shall speak about Helsinki at the end of my remarks. That is why the Government conducted an overhaul of our domestic

scrutiny processes. We want European decision making to be brought closer to the people whom it affects, and transparency and democratic oversight of new legislation are vital to the process.

The United Kingdom is acknowledged to have one of the most highly developed systems for scrutiny of EU business. That is why I was disappointed to hear so much criticism from members of the Scrutiny Committee. The hon. Member for Stone may find this surprising, but I pay tribute to people such as him for their work on the Committee. When I was in Brussels recently, members of the Commission were disappointed that he was not part of the team that went to meet them, because they had heard so much about him. I do not know whether his criticism of Europe extends to a refusal to visit it, but Commission members were disappointed not to meet him. All hon. Members who serve on the Scrutiny Committee play a valuable and important part in the scrutiny process.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Vaz: No. I am left with seven minutes, and, although I am happy to respond to hon. Members' concerns, I want to respond to at least some of the points that have already been made.

As hon. Members will know, arrangements for parliamentary oversight of European legislation have been in place since 1973. The Government built on those arrangements in our White Paper of November 1998, which was endorsed by the House on 17 November 1998. The new scrutiny arrangements, which have now been in place for almost a year, allow the House to consider new European legislation arising across the three pillars of EU activity. The commitment made by Ministers not to agree legislation that is still under scrutiny has been extended to the second and third pillars.

We have also introduced a new system of pre and post-Council scrutiny, which is enabling the Scrutiny Committee to keep abreast of developments in the Council of Ministers. The hon. Member for Stone will remember that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was able to speak to the Committee last week, before the Helsinki summit. We had a six-hour debate on the very issues that are to be discussed in Helsinki. No hon. Member can say that he or she is suffering from a lack of scrutiny of European legislation. I have spent the past two weeks heavily engaged in these matters, as have other hon. Members. The initiative undertaken by the House to establish a national parliamentary office in Brussels will also enhance Westminster's awareness of EU issues. The Government welcome the strengthening of the role of the United Kingdom Parliament in the European Union.

The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), a distinguished former Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, made several points. As a recently appointed Minister for Europe, I share some of the concerns he expressed, having had to get to grips with everything that is happening there. I found, however, that I was extremely well served by the civil servants at UKREP. During the past eight weeks, we have been served by an effective machine made up of the best civil servants dealing with European legislation of any country in the European Union. I am surprised that the right hon. Gentleman does not share my view. I know that civil servants served him well and that he was able to do an effective job. I am glad to see that he joins me in paying tribute to them, as they provide an effective means of ensuring not only that Ministers are informed but that we receive and pass on documents released through Brussels mechanisms as quickly as possible. The right hon. Gentleman also asked about MEPs. I, too, would like to make better use of Members of the European Parliament. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that they regularly come to Westminster when their advice is sought and to give evidence to Select Committees.

The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) has had an unfortunate first six weeks as a member of the Committee. I hope that things can only get better for him. My civil servants make every effort that is humanly possible to ensure that Clerks receive information about European legislation as quickly as possible. I shall look into the hon. Gentleman's points about mislaid letters. As a Member of Parliament, I believe that if hon. Members are considering important legislation, relevant letters and documents should not be lost. We shall examine the system to see how it can be improved, but I do not think that it can be. The hon. Gentleman has to read the papers in question, so he knows that we have to deal with thousands of documents every year. It is very regrettable if one or two go missing, but we shall look into the reasons and try to ensure that it does not happen again.

We shall do our best, as the Clerk of the Committee tries his or her best, to ensure that improvements are made. I have discussed the possibility of telephoning Clerks to say that documents are on their way, but we could be in permanent conversation as there are so many such documents. We shall consider presentational aspects and reflect on comments about making the language of the documents even more effective.

Points were also made about procedure and about the way in which draft directives are deposited. As only two minutes remain, I shall write to all the hon. Members who expressed concerns—I am sorry to place a greater burden on those assisting me—but to whom I have not had the opportunity to reply because of the fruitful discussion that we have had.

I am looking forward to going to Helsinki and to attending tomorrow's historic European Council meeting. Hon. Members are right to say enlargement will affect the way in which the Commission is run. The Government are at the forefront of ensuring that the Commission is run as efficiently and as accountably as possible. We will ensure that such transparency is at the forefront of our campaign to improve Commission institutions.

It is sad that the message sent out by Opposition spokesmen to Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia is so negative. Last night, I met European ambassadors from central and eastern European countries. They think that the Conservative party does not want them in Europe, because of the language that it uses. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) should carefully consider his comments and those of other Opposition Members. The message that they are sending out to the rest of Europe is negative, and I hope that they will retract some of their remarks.

Grammar Schools (Lincolnshire)

12.30 pm

Sir Richard Body (Boston and Skegness): I am grateful for this opportunity to express a concern that is felt by many thousands of people in Lincolnshire and shared by many people in other counties that still have the grammar school system. I also want to apologise to the Minister for School Standards for having caused her some inconvenience the other evening. As so often, on such occasions, the fault rests with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, where I was waiting for a summons to come to the House, but it was not delivered.

I do not know whether the Minister is new Labour or old Labour, but it may not matter much because, whichever she is, one suspects that there is a natural antipathy to the independent sector—a feeling that those who can afford to give their children a private education should not do so. If that is the case, surely the answer is to raise the standards of the state sector so high that parents no longer need to send their children to independent schools and spend tens of thousands of pounds in so doing. That is exactly the position in Lincolnshire.

Lincolnshire is one of our largest counties. Its population includes many thousands of parents who could afford to send their children to be educated privately in one of our famous schools. However, one of the county's distinctive features is that it has no independent schools at secondary level, with the possible exception of Stamford, which is tucked away in the south-west corner of the county and attracts most of its pupils from ouside the county. Therefore, within the county itself, tens of thousands of parents who could afford to send their children to independent schools do not do so because they know that the standards in Lincolnshire are so high that it is unnecessary. Surely, that is the paradigm at which the Government should aim—a state sector so good that parents do not need to use the private sector and sacrifice much of their income to do so.

In Lincolnshire there are many grammar schools, which are open to pupils from whatever background and contain the widest possible social mix. In my constituency, there are many pupils whose parents are out of work and receiving state benefits. Sitting beside those children in the classrooms are children from affluent families. I would have thought that the Minister would approve of that desirable social mix.

Skegness grammar school was the first to apply for, and to receive, grant-maintained status. Having done so, it began to admit boarders. It now has 69 boarders, many of whom come from areas where the comprehensive system operates and is failing pupils. Parents feel that their children would be disadvantaged were they to send them to those schools, so they make the journey to Skegness, where they have found a school of the highest standards. Furthermore—I ask the Minister to bear this in mind—it is not only parents in the United Kingdom who send children to Skegness grammar school. Remarkably, there is now a waiting list of parents from outside the United Kingdom who want to send their children to the school. They come from as far afield as the far east—Hong Kong, for example. The school already has some pupils from the far east and from Germany. I do not know whether the Minister can think of any comprehensive school that attracts pupils from abroad because their parents believe that its standards are so outstandingly high that they wish to send their children across the seas to be educated there, but parents are sending their children to Skegness grammar school from abroad.

I have had the honour to represent the Skegness area for only the past two years. It is a smallish town of about 14,000 people. It is a holiday resort, the air is bracing and it is an excellent place in many ways, but it is not a town that would be instantly known to many people abroad. Despite that, parents are willing to make the journey from Germany and other countries to take advantage of the high-quality education offered there. I put it to the Minister that that is a remarkable fact. Skegness grammar school must be one of the only state sector schools that attracts pupils from outside the country, and has a waiting list of such pupils. Its headmaster has to turn people away and say, "I am sorry, but I cannot take any more pupils from abroad."

In case the Minister suggests that there is any form of elitism there, I emphasise that there is a very good social mix at Skegness grammar school, to which I have already alluded. Children whose parents are on social security are educated alongside children whose parents are extremely well off.

There are two other grammar schools, or the equivalent, in my constituency: Boston grammar school and Boston high school, both of which have extremely high standards. For many years, Miss Webb was the headmistress of Boston high school, and she attracted staff from the private sector who wanted to teach in her school. I am glad to say that the present headmaster is maintaining that high standard and is attracting staff from other countries to teach there. That also is remarkable.

The staff at those three schools—I suspect that the same applies to other grammar schools in the county—are apprehensive about the future. They have come to Lincolnshire to teach in those schools because they offer an intellectual challenge, and the staff appreciate the ambience—to use a somewhat overused word—to be found there. There might be an emphasis on academic work in those schools, but that encourages staff to apply for jobs there, and they would be reluctant to apply if the schools were part of the comprehensive system. Indeed, many of those staff have come from the comprehensive system, albeit the more academic streams of that system. I say to the Minister—I hope that she will bear this in mind—that many of those staff are worried about what the future holds and wonder whether they would be wise to start looking for posts in the private sector. We all know that morale among teaching staff is not high in the state sector at the moment. They believe that there is bureaucracy and that they have too little control over the decisions that are taken in their schools. That is not the case in the private sector, where staff morale is high. Too many teachers in Lincolnshire's grammar schools will look for new posts if they believe that the decision has been taken to merge their schools with secondary moderns. That would be a tragedy. The high standard in Lincolnshire's schools is due to high-quality staff. The danger is that if that quality is lowered, the schools will suffer.

The Minister could mention the ballot to allow the public to decide, but she knows, as I do—I shall not rehearse the arguments—that that will be loaded against the grammar schools. She might be interested to know that Lincolnshire county council has not always been Conservative. For four years, until two years ago, we had a Labour-Liberal coalition that was a little ambivalent about grammar schools, but it is mute now because it would be politically unpopular to raise the subject.

We have debated the issue in Lincolnshire. The debate began when Shirley Williams, as Secretary of State for Education, threatened the closure of our grammar schools. We fought and won a great battle, and I can detect no substantial feeling in the country against grammar schools, which are seen as a wonderful opportunity for boys and girls—however poor and disadvantaged they may be—to receive a first-class education that is as good as any in the private sector. Many have gone on to Oxford and Cambridge and, from there, to distinguished careers in the professions and elsewhere.

It would be a total tragedy to lose the remarkable blend of excellence without elitism. Elitism plays no part in education in Lincolnshire. I hope that the Minister will have kind words for our education system and assure both parents and staff that it will not be threatened. The issue has been debated over the years. Even the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party are quiet on the subject. We want to retain grammar schools without the threat of their closure. If the Minister is in doubt, she should visit the schools in Lincolnshire, which would impress her greatly.

12.44 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I support the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body). Grammar schools are beacons of excellence in our education system. It is high time that their opponents learned the fundamental lesson that we shall never improve the rest of our schools by destroying some of the best of our schools.

The simple truth is that the ballot procedure is weighted against the grammar schools. I know that the Minister has strong views on this matter, but it would be unconscionable, under a Government who spout the mantra of support for the many, not the few, if we were, as we approach the next millennium, to replace selection according to ability to achieve with selection according to ability to pay. That would be a disgrace and a scandal, and the Conservative party would have nothing to do with it. We shall fight as the only national political party unequivocally committed to the retention of the outstanding grammar schools, some of which are in the county of Lincolnshire and one of which is in the constituency so admirably represented by my hon. Friend.

12.45 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your appointment to chair these trial Adjournment debates. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) on securing the debate and thank him for his apology for failing to turn up the last time that we discussed a similar matter.

I accept the sincerity of the hon. Gentleman's words and what he says about the quality of education in the schools in his constituency. I join him in congratulating all nursery, primary and secondary school teachers in Boston and Skegness, and throughout Lincolnshire, on their work. It was interesting that we heard little about the schools in Boston and Skegness that are not grammar schools. We know, by definition of the system, that where there are grammar schools, there are secondary modern schools, which I think are called high schools in Boston and Skegness. I also want to record, as the hon. Gentleman did not, that in the non-grammar schools in his constituency there are strong teacher commitment, good teacher skills and a lot of student progress. We should appreciate all that teachers do in his constituency.

The Government have no antipathy to the independent sector. We have made more efforts to forge links and join partnerships with the independent sector than the Conservatives did. The sector has welcomed the independent-state school partnership funding that we have made available. However, I agree that it would be intolerable if parents believed that the only way to get a good education was to go to the independent sector. I defend a parent's right to buy an education for their child. Our responsibility is to ensure that parents are not forced to make that choice because there are no good schools elsewhere.

Where I differ from the hon. Gentleman is that I do not believe that the only way to assure parents that they need not buy education is to offer them a selective school system. Throughout the country, non-selective local authority comprehensive schools are getting good results even though they teach children across the ability range. The hon. Gentleman asked whether parents who live abroad are queueing up to send their children to comprehensive schools. Funnily enough, on a radio interview about primary performance tables this morning, which I did not know about before 7 am, I was asked what I thought about a small maintained non-selective school in Oxfordshire which parents from America were queueing up to send their children to because of its good literacy and numeracy results.

Let us not fall into the trap of thinking that the only good schools are those in the selective system. If we take the view that the only way to get high standards is to have grammar schools, we must admit that we cannot meet the challenge of raising standards for every child. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who seems to be the Opposition spokesman on grammar schools, is vociferous on this issue. He pledged that his Government, if there ever is one, would be committed to keeping grammar schools. That is the Conservatives' problem. This Government are committed to raising standards in 24,000 schools, not to keeping good standards in only 164 schools. That is the challenge. I accept that there are good standards in grammar schools, but the crusade for our school service is greater than that; it is about how we meet the needs of the country so that we have a work force, a population and a learning community in which standards rise for everyone.

There is a debate about whether the best way to raise standards and achieve excellence for everyone is to have

[Ms Estelle Morris]

selective education, but that is the wrong question. We have successfully announced and published performance tables for literacy and numeracy at primary school level. They show that, with good teaching and good strategies, and working from best practice with properly funded schools, training and support for teachers and, above all, clear, high expectations of everyone in the education service, we can raise standards in every school. Today's literacy and numeracy results show that, whether in urban or rural areas, poor or affluent areas, areas where they thought they could not do it or areas where they have always been sure that they could, with the right mixture of good teaching and proper leadership we can raise standards across the board. We must achieve that for the whole system.

I mention that because it proves that our task is doable. I am not content to leave this country's future—or its children's future—to the risk of whether children can get into a grammar school. If the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness had said that his constituency had a system of grammar schools and secondary modern schools all of which raised standards for all children, we might have had a different debate.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Ms Morris: I will give way shortly, because I promised, but I remind the hon. Member for Buckingham that in his note he said that he would not make a speech—and he has had the opportunity to do so.

If the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness had made the argument that I described, the debate might have been different. However, clearly that our challenge is not to defend the future admission arrangements of 164 schools, but to ensure that we raise standards in 24,000 schools. We must do that. Grammar schools were set up when this country needed only a few children to achieve the highest levels, and they delivered that, but the debate has moved on and the task now is to construct a system that raises standards for everyone.

I want to make one more point; then I shall give way to the hon. Member for Buckingham. I assure the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness that he should not feel downhearted. I appreciate that his experience as a Member of Parliament representing an area with selective education; on the whole, that is not my experience, though there are a small number of selective schools in my constituency. My teaching experience took place in an authority that was highly comprehensive. Across a range of local authorities and schools, the highest-achieving 24 per cent. in comprehensive schools achieve at the same level as those in grammar schools—the figure is about 24 per cent. in most local authorities. Therefore the bright children who are educated in local education authorities with no selection achieve at the level of those who are taught in selective schools. The evidence shows that children who achieve at high levels can do so whether they go to a selective or comprehensive school.

Mr. Bercow rose—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. I feel compelled to point out that this is not a general debate. It is a 30-minute Adjournment debate which, under the conventions of the House, is an opportunity for individual hon. Members to speak directly with and gain responses from Ministers; it should not be an opportunity for Front-Bench Opposition spokesmen to intervene. On this occasion, as the Minister has allowed it, it may happen, but it is extraordinary and it will not create a precedent.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful for that guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I shall take note of it. I am also grateful to the Minister for her generosity in giving way. Will she accept that she cannot get away with painting the Conservative party as the supporter of only grammar schools? I myself attended a comprehensive school and I accept the importance of supporting good schools of whatever structure. The Minister said that it was standards, not structure, that mattered.

I think that it is clear that the Minister is hostile to selection, but will she now answer a question that she has previously always ducked? If she had a vote in a grammar school ballot, would she answer the ballot question yes or no?

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman has put on the record his views about what the Conservative party defends. I am happy for people to read the record and compare his intervention with what he said earlier.

I turn to the current arrangements for grammar school ballots. We have set up a mechanism whereby local people can decide what a school's future admission arrangements should be. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness rightly said that this has always been an issue. As far back as I can remember, the presence or absence of selective admission arrangements has been a political and an educational issue that has never gone away. It was an issue for Mrs. Thatcher when she was Secretary of State for Education—that is why she changed the admission arrangements in more grammar schools than anyone else—it was an issue for the Labour party when it was last in government and it is an issue now.

Given that the issue will not go away, there are three ways of deciding whether to change admission arrangments. We can decide on it as a Government; we can let the local authority decide; or we can give the power to decide to parents. We have said that we shall give that power to parents. It is not an option to decree that there should be no more debate on the future admission arrangements of grammar schools; that will just not happen. I shall explain why I think that we have done the right thing, and I shall also answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Buckingham.

We have made our decision because, as a Government who are committed to education in a way that no previous Government have been committed to it, we shall succeed or fail by what we do for the school system, not what we do about the admission arrangements in 164 schools. If we take our eye off the ball to join that hugely contentious debate, we risk wasting our resources, energy and time. I am glad that I have spent

the past year supporting schools in their introduction of the literacy and numeracy strategies, which the hon. Member for Buckingham would not make schools maintain. I am also glad that I will—if it is what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister wants me to do—spend the next year raising standards through "Excellence in Cities", and education action zones rather than arguing about grammar school ballots, which is what would have happened. We have taken the pragmatic view that our time is better spent on other matters.

One can argue that we should not have given parents the right to determine admission arrangements, but one cannot say that we should not have the debate and there should be no mechanism for changing those arrangements. The issue is contentious, but we cannot deny parents who want to change admission arrangements the right to do so. We must give someone somewhere the authority and the mechanism to allow that change to be made if that is what people want.

Nothing is set in stone. Politics must always allow for a mechanism for change. I am happy to defend our decision to put the potential for change in the hands of parents. It would be silly if, having spent considerable legislative time on that and having been determined not to get personally embroiled in the argument about selective schools, I fell into the trap of the hon. Member for Buckingham by answering his question directly. He knows—because we say it—that the Government do not want more selection and we do not think that more selection is the key to raising standards across the board. We are, however, happy to do our best with the school system that we have to raise standards for every child. I am not a parent, so I will not answer the hon. Gentleman's question—although it is difficult not to, because I keep being asked it.

I shall finish by paraphrasing what the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness said, because I strongly agree with him. Reflecting on the good schools in his constituency, he said that they were good because they had good teachers. He is dead right. Those schools are good because they have good teachers, not because of their admission arrangements. If a school has to rely on its admission arrangements to achieve good results, I would question its quality of teaching, learning and management as well as its focus and curriculum. I pay tribute to the schools about which the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness talked and I am confident that if their teachers were to teach in schools without selective admission arrangements, their skills and professionalism would serve any child well. I leave the future of the admission arrangements of the schools in the hon. Gentleman's consituency exactly where they should be: in the hands of the parents whose children will be most affected.

Fireworks

1 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Older and wiser parliamentary heads advise me that the crafty Member begins his Adjournment debate by praising the Minister for all that the Department has achieved. The effect of such a eulogy is doubly beneficial: it sets the Minister off feeling well disposed towards that hon. Member and therefore less likely to savage his arguments and, more importantly, it makes any self-respecting Minister self-conscious about repeating what one has said about her Department's achievements. Such repetition normally comprises at least one third of the speech that civil servants have prepared and so the eulogy liberates a good five minutes in which the Minister will feel obliged to answer the Member's questions.

That is the theory; we must see how it works in practice. I begin with fulsome praise for the Government's Fireworks (Safety) Regulations 1997, set out in SI 2294. All fireworks sold to the general public must comply with the regulations, which stipulate that all fireworks on sale to the public must comply with British standard 7114 and that the minimum age for purchasing fireworks is 18—previously, it was 16. Sixteen-year-olds can now buy only party poppers, caps and cracker snaps. Perhaps most significantly, the regulations have banned the public supply of aerial shells, aerial maroons, shells-in-mortar, maroons-in-mortar, bangers, mini-rockets and fireworks of erratic flight, such as helicopters, squibs and jumping jacks. In addition, some large and powerful fireworks have been banned from sale except to exempted professional pyrotechnic display organisers.

The regulations were passed speedily by the new Labour Government and are most welcome additional controls on what was becoming a fireworks free-for-all. I have only praise for the Minister and her Department in that respect and I do not doubt that, in her speech, she will tell us that, following the introduction of the regulations, the number of serious injuries requiring treatment at hospital casualty departments fell from 1,233 in 1996 to just 908 in 1997—a drop of more than 26 per cent.—with a further drop of 10 per cent. in the following year. Or rather, I do not doubt that she would have told us that had I not already done so.

I suggest a more helpful line for the Minister to take. Instead of repeating the list of regulations, she could tell us about their enforcement, an obligation placed on local authority trading standards officers. Suppliers who breach the regulations can be prosecuted in a magistrates court and fined up to £5,000, imprisoned for up to six months, or both fined and imprisoned. Will the Minister advise us not of the regulations but of how well and how thoroughly they are being enforced? Will she tell us how many prosecutions have been initiated against suppliers of fireworks in each of the past three years? How many of those prosecutions have led to a conviction and how many convictions have led to the imposition of either the maximum fine or a custodial sentence?

When I requested such information from my local trading standards office—the office for Brent and Harrow—I discovered that in 1998–99, in an area with a population of more than 500,000, there were only eight

[Mr. Barry Gardiner]

prosecutions, all for sales to minors. The largest fine was for £500, there were two fines for just £100, and there was one conditional discharge. During the previous year, there were only three prosecutions. Hon. Members should remember that the figures were for an area of 500,000 people. Of the three prosecutions, two were for sales to minors with fines of £250 and one for selling on the streets with a fine of £300.

The local trading standards officer was keen to note that shops needed no licence—they simply had to pay £11.70 to register as vendors of fireworks. He said that that fee did not even cover the administration cost and that, what is worse, there was no power to refuse or to evoke someone's registration. Overall, he continued, the office's role was reactive rather than proactive because it was understaffed.

The simple point is that the best regulations in the world are only as good as the enforcement officers. Enforcement is at best patchy, and at worst inadequate, to put it politely. The supply of fireworks is a commercial enterprise in which the rewards are so great that the risk of a £5,000 fine may be deemed an acceptable business cost. Does the Minister consider present levels of enforcement to be acceptable? If not, what will her Department do about them?

Enforcement problems are compounded because the United Kingdom has no register of firework delivery. Unlike many of our European counterparts, the United Kingdom allows hundreds of tonnes of explosives to be delivered to a shop or warehouse with no obligation to notify the local authority or even the fire brigade. How are local trading standards officers supposed to do their job—to check compliance with British standard 7114 and to check that no prohibited fireworks are being sold—when they do not even know where the fireworks are?

At a fireworks industry conference in September, one trading standards officer from Essex reported that four tonnes of fireworks had been delivered to a private householder. When contacted, the firework company that had made the delivery retorted that, as far as they were concerned, the purchaser could have had 20 tonnes had he so wanted. Sadly, the law would allow that. Private individuals may take delivery of vast quantities of explosives and store them for up to 14 days, without having to notify a competent authority and without an official record being required.

Does the Minister not consider protection of the public to require the establishment of a fireworks register? Trading standards officers and fire brigades throughout the country could then track the whereabouts of large volumes of fireworks in the community.

I return to the case of the Essex householder. What qualifications did he have to prove and what training did he have to show to persuade the firework company that he was competent to handle safely four tonnes of fireworks? The answer is none. Were the Minister to find herself living next door to such a gentleman, would she not expect him to have had training and some qualification before he was given custody of four tonnes of explosives?

I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy), for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy) and for Lincoln (Gillian Merron), who have actively campaigned on the issue. The private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton proposed such a national training scheme for those operating fireworks displays. Sadly and disgracefully, her Bill was talked out by two Conservative Members, despite receiving all-party support and Government assistance. Given that the Government supported such a scheme under that Bill, why do they not implement one? Will the Minister consider establishing powers whereby local authorities could regulate public fireworks displays to ensure safety?

I turn now to the most pressing and depressing part of the matter. I am not the only constituency MP to receive an annual flood of complaints from residents about disturbance from fireworks. My local authority, Brent council, informs me that its environment department received more than 400 complaints last year. Constituents cannot understand why the law does not empower someone—they do not care whether that is the council or the police—to stop the constant nightly bombardment that they experience.

One of my constituents described the situation in this way:

"Dear Mr. Gardiner, as I write this letter at 11 pm, it sounds like World War III has been going on outside since 5.30 pm and that it will go on to midnight.

It started last Thursday 15 October and how long it goes on for I don't know. My neighbour tells me all through November."

The lady continues:

"Neither I nor my four cats have ever experienced anthing like this. I had a severe migraine over the weekend and my cats are terrified and distressed."

This year, I lodged an appeal in my local newspaper, the *Wembley Observer* urging residents to be more considerate of their neighbours and to finish their firework parties by 11 pm, to give some respite to the elderly, to babies, to pets and to ordinary people who just want to go to sleep in their own homes so that they can get up for their job of work the next morning without feeling that they have spent the night as film extras in the movie "Saving Private Ryan". I believe that my appeal had some success, but unfortunately the bombardments continued.

I am aware that the regulation-making powers under the Consumer Protection Act 1987 do not allow the Minister to restrict the periods during which fireworks can be legally sold or let off, but that is precisely why further legislation is needed. The public simply do not accept that legislation can go into immense detail about noisy machinery, amplified music and even, under the Noise and Statutory Nuisance Act 1993, specify that a car with a faulty vehicle alarm can be towed away and impounded, yet nothing can be done to relieve the nightly misery for thousands of residents throughout the country from firework parties that produce enormous noise, cause huge distress and disrupt people's lives.

The Minister will, no doubt, have been advised that noise from fireworks could be deemed a statutory nuisance under part III of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Sadly, the reality is as described to me by my local director of environmental health. I quote from his letter:

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"While the Environmental Protection Act 1990 is particularly effective at dealing with noise from loud amplified music, noisy machinery or plant and intruder alarms, it is not effective or appropriate to deal with noise from fireworks."

In those remarks, the director of environmental health was supported by the Metropolitan police service, which wrote to me as follows:

"Thank you for your letter dated 20 October in which you bring to my attention the inconvenience caused to your constituents by noisy fireworks. Unfortunately, police have very limited powers to deal with such incidents, especially when they occur on private premises. The local authority Noise Abatement Section of the Environmental Health Department also has very specific and limited powers which do not enable them to deal effectively with these problems."

I urge the Minister to put in place an effective means of dealing with these problems.

This year, the fireworks industry has rejected the Department of Trade and Industry's call for a ban on firework sales until three days before the new year celebrations for the millennium. What that means is that in 23 days' time one family in this country will face the next millennium with a family member, possibly a child, having been injured, maimed or perhaps killed by the use of an unsafe firework, or by the use of fireworks at a display that was unsafely operated. The Department of Trade and Industry calculates that the cost of each injury to the national health service is £6,000, but the cost to the family involved will be considerably more.

1.14 pm

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) on his success in securing the debate on an important subject that is of concern to many members of the public, especially parents, at this time of the year. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the courtesies with which he began his speech and for his praise for the officials in my Department who are responsible for considerably strengthening the regulations on the subject. My hon. Friend successfully did as he intended and pre-empted many of my briefing notes, prepared by the same helpful officials for the debate. I congratulate him on his research before opening the debate.

I reinforce the point that my hon. Friend acknowledged that we have taken steps to strengthen the regulation of fireworks. There is no doubt that the new regulations that we introduced in 1997, which came into effect on 1 January 1998, have significantly reduced the number of firework injuries—certainly those that were treated in hospital accident and emergency departments. We can measure that by the reports from hospitals in the four-week period around the 5 November firework season last year. We do not yet have the figures for this year's season. They will be available early next year and will be published in the usual way at the time. I hope that the figures for this year will continue to show a fall in the number of accidents resulting from inappropriate or dangerous use of fireworks.

It is important, too, to remember that every year, millions of people safely buy and enjoy fireworks for their own entertainment in their back gardens and those of their friends, or as part of public displays. I am glad that several authorities, including my local authority, Leicester city council, have put on highly successful public displays of fireworks, to encourage more families and members of the public to enjoy firework displays without running the risks often associated with the private use of fireworks in people's back gardens. However, I do not think that the Government should prevent the safe and thoroughly enjoyable use of fireworks in people's private property and at public displays.

The difficulties, which my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North described extremely vividly, arise from people who are either careless or positively dangerous in misusing fireworks intended for their own enjoyment, which tragically injure, maim or occasionally kill one of their own family members.

The other problems to which my hon. Friend referred, and from which his constituent suffered so seriously, arise from thoughtless youngsters, hooligans and vandals using fireworks of various kinds to make other people's lives a misery. That is a real problem, but it is only a small part of the overall picture of the use of fireworks.

There are people—my hon. Friend made it clear that he was not one of them—who are really calling on us to ban the sale and purchase of fireworks for private use. I do not believe that that is a sensible way forward, and I am glad that my hon. Friend shares that opinion. As he said, my Department undertook a review of firework sales in 1996 and rejected the option of a total ban, not least because of fears that a total ban on the sale of fireworks for private use might lead to the development of a black market for fireworks and also to the possibility of people obtaining the ingredients and making their own devices. Neither of those situations would impove public safety; indeed, both would severely jeopardise it and would not be acceptable.

We decided instead to act in the way that my hon. Friend accurately described through the introduction and implementation of the Fireworks (Safety) Regulations in 1997. My hon. Friend referred to the registration of shops selling fireworks. The Health and Safety Executive is reviewing the Explosives Act 1875, which dates back more than 100 years, to see whether we need to strengthen the powers to refuse or to revoke registration to a retailer selling fireworks.

An important issue arises there. A voluntary code of practice with the fireworks industry deals with the period during which fireworks may be sold. Under the code, the fireworks industry has agreed that they should be sold only for three weeks before 5 November and for a couple of days thereafter. The industry reinforces that message to retailers at the beginning of every season. As my hon. Friend said, the agreement this year, with the millennium weekend coming up, was that fireworks would be displayed for sale only from 27 December. Like my hon. Friend, I am disappointed that some newsagents and other shops have continued to sell fireworks right through since the 5 November season in anticipation of the millennium weekend. Looking ahead to that weekend, preliminary indications that I have had are that, compared with the normal pre-new year period, sales are less than 20 per cent. higher than usual for the time of year. Most additional sales are accounted for by high-value firework purchases, obviously made by people who plan large public displays. These are in a different category from private purchasers.

[Ms Patricia Hewitt]

The Government do not have powers under the Consumer Protection Act 1987 to control anything other than the intrinsic safety of the goods themselves and we use those powers. The period of sale of fireworks is an issue for the voluntary code of practice. We have discussed this problem with the British Pyrotechnics Association. I hope that it will take further action with its members to try to reduce the number of retail outlets that defy the code by trying to sell fireworks in the weeks before Christmas and before 27 December when, under the code, firework sales would be expected to begin again.

My hon. Friend also raised the controls on the storage of fireworks by private individuals. This, too, is a matter for the Health and Safety Executive under the Control of Explosives Regulations 1991. The regulations allow up to 5 kg of fireworks for private use to be kept on individual premises. The case that my hon. Friend mentioned clearly falls well outside the scope of the regulations. If he will let me have further details of the report that he has procured, I shall be happy to ensure that the matter is properly investigated.

The regulations also permit unlimited quantities of fireworks to be stored for up to 14 days. This may be the source of the problem to which my hon. Friend referred, although the regulations stipulate that fireworks must be kept in a safe and suitable place and all due precautions taken for public safety. A back garden shed or garage may not fit the regulation's requirements.

As I said, the Health and Safety Executive is reviewing existing explosives legislation and the review may result in changes to existing conditions for the keeping of fireworks for private use. I shall ensure that my hon. Friend is kept up to date as the review progresses.

My hon. Friend quoted from a letter from a constituent who had suffered badly around 5 November. All hon. Members know that trouble with noisy neighbours and local vandals—and worse, positively criminal neighbours—is one of the most intractable problems that we face in our advice surgeries. There will always be limits to the powers of the police and local authorities and to their resources for dealing with the problem.

The Fireworks Bill—a private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy)—would have introduced many sensible additions to the regulatory package now in place for the control of fireworks. The Government supported her Bill, and I greatly regret that two Conservative Members chose to talk it out. It would have given the necessary powers to provide for mandatory training of people who operate large public displays. It would have dealt with the times during which fireworks could be sold—now purely a matter for the industry's voluntary code of practice—and provided powers to limit the letting off of fireworks except at specified times. These problems cannot be tackled under the current powers available to us, be they in the Fireworks Bill or the Consumer Protection Act 1987. It is a pity that that private Member's Bill failed. I hope that in a future private Members' ballot, any hon. Member who has an interest in this issue will succeed in reviving the Bill.

As my hon. Friend knows, the pressures on legislative time are enormous. When I became a Minister last year, I assumed that the biggest difficulty that the Government would face would be finding sufficient money to do all the things that we need to do. That is always a challenge, although one that is brilliantly discharged by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. The big difficulty is finding time. I am afraid that I cannot give my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North the comfort that he seeks. There is no immediate or medium-term prospect of the Government introducing fireworks legislation. The legislative priorities to fulfil our manifesto commitments are such that, as he is aware, Bills with an even higher priority than one on this subject are already fighting for parliamentary time.

None the less, possibilities are available under secondary legislation. I have already mentioned the review being undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive. I can also reassure my hon. Friend that officials from various Departments and agencies work closely on this subject. My Department, the Health and Safety Executive, the Home Office and the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions work closely together, as we did when drawing up the 1987 regulations and will do again when we consider the recommendations that follow the Health and Safety Executive's review.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North questioned whether trading standards officers and the police were successful in enforcing the current regulations and statutory provisions, and suggested, no doubt on the basis of his constituency experience, that perhaps they were not. I do not have to hand figures for prosecutions and convictions, but I shall try to obtain those from the co-ordinating body for trading standards officers and send it to my hon. Friend. However, it must be a matter for local authorities, within their resources, which we are increasing every year, to determine local priorities. There are a large number of regulations—many people would say too many—and we have constantly to review regulatory burdens. With many regulations we look to trading standards officers for effective enforcement. Local authorities must decide on the most effective use of resources and determine priorities.

I can reassure my hon. Friend that we shall work closely with the industry and with local authorities to reinforce the message about safe use and enjoyment of fireworks. For the millennium weekend, we shall carry forward the "alcohol and fireworks do not mix" message that we successfully introduced for this year's 5 November weekend. I end by congratulating my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and on participating in the steps that we are taking to ensure that fireworks are enjoyed safely.

Housing Benefit

1.30 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Outside our Chamber, carols are being played and the spirit of Christmas is in the air, but I am not going to be able to tell such a cheerful tale here.

I received this morning a policy research briefing from the National Housing Federation entitled "Housing benefit system in crisis". It certainly is in a crisis, which is entirely unacceptable. Many of the poorest and least advantaged people in Britain—though our debate deals with England—are suffering, while many local councils incompetently handle housing benefit and while the Government, despite promises and fine words, incompetently fail to make them do any better. In some parts of the country, the system is a shambles and in other parts it is a disgrace. In my borough of Southwark—I know that you live there too, Mr. Deputy Speaker—housing benefit administration is both a shambles and a disgrace.

I hope that this debate will encourage the Government to answer some questions. Instead of merely promises of reviews, monitoring, assessments and injunctions on local authorities to do better, we want action and answers, so that our constituents do not have to contend with such a consistently awful service. We are sick of people passing the buck; sick of councils engaging contractors who then are passed the blame; sick of contractors working on the basis of contracts that can never be produced; and sick of constituents being passed around from pillar to post, day after day, week after week, month after month.

I was in my constituency office this morning when I received a phone call from a lady who is entitled to £88 housing benefit a fortnight, but she has not been paid since 26 July and we are now in December. She has had to pay £58.50 to the council out of her pension while she waits for the arrears.

Every day, more people in north Southwark and Bermondsey complain about housing benefit—people such as an old lady of 81 living alone in west Walworth, with no immediate family, dependent on state pension and related benefits. She wrote to me in April this year. She moved to a new property, after which her housing benefit stopped, and she received demands for payments of £253.56. She has written to me seven times altogether, since first contacting me in April. In September, she wrote:

"I am out of my mind with worry . . . I hate being in debt."

In October, she wrote that the housing officer

"has received all the proof he needs yet he still insists I have to pay full rent of more than £63.00 per week plus council taxes. Just how does he expect me to do this out of my pension? He should try doing it. I am really suicidal, Mr. Hughes, over this lot. I have always paid my debts,—more so the rent".

On November 25, she wrote again:

"I cannot understand why I am having all this trouble, both from"

the neighbourhood housing office

"and now the council tax department. I had a letter threatening me unless I pay what they say I owe they will take action. I am worried sick, it is making me confused . . . How am I able to pay full rent, heating and water charges and council taxes out of my total income of £82.25?"

She has yet to hear about her renewal claim, and she is not assuaged by the answer that it is all the fault of the new verification process.

A private tenant—the previous lady was a council tenant—applied to renew his claim for housing benefit on 21 September this year. It was due to expire on 28 November, giving the authorities two months to deal with it. Due to continual errors, he has yet to receive confirmation of renewal by the beginning of December. His last payment was on 16 November.

For a final example, I take two constituents who are private landlords, a couple who own two neighbouring houses. They wrote to me when they were owed £8,000 from their two properties. It took 11 weeks to process one renewal claim because of inaccuracy and delay. They still await the other claim being processed.

That is just not acceptable. The figures that I am about to give will shock even some of the least shockable Members of Parliament. There are rules that set out what councils should do, according to which local authorities should seek to promote the well-being of the local community and help those that they can into employment. According to the framework rules for the administration of housing benefit and council tax benefit, councils should "operate an efficient system", provide an "efficient service", provide "best value" to taxpayers and claimants, provide an effective service in terms of quickly and accurately determining and paying genuine claims, provide a "customer-focused service" to communicate clearly and effectively with clients, provide advice and information, treat people with courtesy and respect their dignity and privacy. The experience of my 81-year-old constituent is hardly an example of that.

The rules are clear. There are also regulations, the most important of which are that determinations should be made within 14 days of supplying the relevant information and the first payment should be made 14 days after receipt of the claim. There are other dates and timetables, but those are the two crucial dates.

I interject that a further problem arises from the existence of different systems for applying for housing benefit and for council tax benefit and income support. People may not provide the right information the first time and may be confused as to what information they should supply. We should consider establishing a common form of application so that those who are entitled to income support as well as housing benefit and would normally have to go to the Department of Social Security as well as the council office could have their claims examined at the same time. It would be better to streamline procedures as much as possible.

Let me deal with Southwark first and then widen the context. Southwark has a Labour council hanging on by its fingertips. Control is through the casting vote of the mayor, as in Islington, which we hope will cease to be Labour-controlled this month with Southwark falling not long afterwards. My party is currently in opposition in both boroughs. In 1996–97, Southwark's system was run in-house by the internal contractors and 97 per cent. of claims were processed within two weeks. Charter marks and awards were conferred. What happened the following year is a reflection of the result of the pressure put on councils by the previous and the present Government to do less themselves and contract out

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

more. As soon as the contract went out, payment within 14 days went down to 60 per cent., and last year it was down to 22.4 per cent.

I raised that matter across the Floor of the Chamber last year with the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle). She answered:

"I am aware of the problems being experienced in Southwark. My officials have received a detailed report"—

and I would be grateful if it were published—

"which confirms that there are delays. An action plan has been drawn up to clear the arrears of work that have been implemented. I have asked to receive reports from the authority so that progress on the action plan can be monitored"—

and I would grateful if they could be published too.

"Southwark and the private contractors are . . . working together . . . I am told that the arrears of work have been reduced considerably and that the authority expects to make further progress on the workload until the situation returns to normal in November."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1998; Vol. 317, c. 948.]

My colleagues on the council—including Councillors Derek Partridge and Nick Stanton and our housing spokesman, Councillor Niko Baar— have pursued this matter persistently in other committees, as the council records show. We forced an additional meeting of Southwark council last November with requisitioned business in order to deal with those matters and there are perpetual promises of further reports and further investigation.

I would like to tell hon. Members the result of the "return to normal". The council decided that it could set a target for this year of 102 per cent. of its rent due to be collected—that means some of the arrears plus 100 per cent. of this year's rent. So far, according to the report presented to last night's meeting of Southwark housing committee, it has collected 93.63 per cent. The rent collected in Southwark is about £150 million a year. Rent arrears were targeted to be under £20 million, but are already running at £26 million. The target percentage for the assessment of new claims within 14 days is 100 per cent., yet only 5.4 per cent. of new claims are being assessed within 14 days.

Last night, the majority group on the council tabled a motion asking for a further report to be brought to the council in March 2000 saying what would be done and how performance targets would be met. My Liberal Democrat colleagues tabled an amendment that was accepted, saying that if the targets were not met by 31 January, appropriate action should be taken in liquidated damages against CSL, the contractors, and a report should be submitted to the committee in March 2000 on the possibility of terminating the contract. Had it not been for my colleagues, we would simply have been given the same complacent answer that we have received for over a year. If returning to normal means that 5 per cent. of the claims are processed in time, Southwark residents do not think much of normality.

In a letter in October concerning a specific inquiry about the private sector tenants and their landlords who were owed £8,000, the chief executive of Southwark wrote:

"I can confirm that Southwark Legal Services will not commence possession proceedings until a document known as 'HP pre-court pro forma' has been obtained. This document confirms that the tenant named is not awaiting the outcome of any application for Housing Benefit."

The figures he then gave me showed that 6,600 claims were outstanding on 1 October compared with 3,500 in June. A paper before last night's meeting of the housing committee confirmed that at Lambeth county court, 35.3 per cent. of the 168 cases listed by Southwark for possession between 13 and 27 October this year were adjourned specifically because the housing benefit had not been processed. The judge said that the court was appalled by the large number of cases being adjourned, particularly those adjourned more than once for the same reason. The court told the council that, if the position was not remedied quickly, it would consider simply dismissing any case brought back to it that had originally been adjourned because of housing benefit and in which the issues had still not been resolved.

Every sum not collected and every instalment of rent not paid because the housing benefit is not paid means that repairs and maintenance are not carried out. Not only are my 81-year-old constituent and thousands like her identically nearly driven to suicide, but much less maintenance and for fewer repairs are done. Southwark refuses to show its contract with CSL even to members of the council who have a right to know. I ask the Minister to direct the council or to take other powers to ensure that the contract, even if not its financial terms, is published so that the reason why Southwark will not take action against CSL to terminate the contract can be out in the open for all to see.

The contract was apparently so badly drafted that anything that could be defined in court as outside the responsibility of the council would allow CSL not to be liable. Therefore the verification procedure introduced this April, which is a checking procedure to avoid housing benefit fraud, might prevent CSL from being liable. Blame just gets passed to and fro. CSL remains in place. In contrast to the in-house contractors who did the job excellently, we now have an outside firm which is doing appallingly in Southwark and elsewhere in the country, yet no one is willing to take action. A report is brought back regularly to the council, yet the council does not respond. That happens not just in Southwark, but elsewhere. Yesterday, the Freedom of Information Bill received its Second Reading. Freedom of information should mean that contracts like this are not secret but are out in the open. If we can have more openness in local government for these matters, we might have a more satisfactory conclusion.

In its letter of 6 December, the National Housing Federation says that, according to the survey that it has just completed, the average claim time for its housing association properties around the country is 7.3 weeks. The league table for local authorities around the country shows that Southwark is bad, but it is not the only one in that position. Lambeth, which is next door, is worse. That is another Labour-controlled council. It has the poorest performance indicators in inner London, and over the last financial year it processed only 29 per cent. of claims within 14 days. Colleagues in Lambeth have told me about an 85-year-old woman living in sheltered accommodation and in remission from cancer whose renewal form was lost and who was therefore sent a £500 demand for arrears.

The league table for last year shows that Lambeth processes 29 per cent. of applications within 14 days, Islington processes 49 per cent. and Southwark 60 per cent. The national average is 84 per cent. Other councils

in the west country which also have CSL as their service provider have criticised its performance. My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) drew attention to the practice in Taunton Deane council. Kingston upon Thames has returned its housing benefit administration to its in-house team and has terminated its contract with CSL. If more people terminated their contracts with CSL and took it to court for liquidated damages, we might get somewhere.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): In preparing for the debate, I looked at the question that the hon. Gentleman is addressing. Kingston has not terminated the contract but has given the contractor notice of its dissatisfaction. In fact, just one Labour council has terminated its contract with this supplier.

Mr. Hughes: I stand corrected. My information was that it had. I was aware that it was considering it and I was told that it had. The Minister's information may be more up to date.

Newham, because of the backlog, now answers only emergency phone calls. In Norwich last year, 58 per cent. of housing benefit overpayments were misclassified as fraud. The picture is clear. Although I obviously have a constituency interest, which is where the issue began, my inquiries reveal that similar problems around the country are not uncommon. Another test is the number of complaints to the ombudsman. Last year, for this one element of council activity, there were 74 complaints in Brent, 43 in Islington, 53 in Wandsworth, 123 in Southwark and 296 in Lambeth.

I saw the report of the speech given by the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Wallasey, to a conference in Bournemouth in October where she said that local authorities were vital to the success of welfare reform and that they should take more responsibility for improving customer service, reducing errors and cutting fraud in benefit claims. She said:

"Some local authorities provide a very high quality service. But the picture is inconsistent. In far too many cases people claiming benefits receive a slow and inefficient service."

We know that, but who will do anything about it is now the question.

There are a couple of ways forward. First, the Government must address the question, which they have not yet addressed, of the supply and price of rented accommodation. I served on the Committee debating the Bill that became the Housing Act back in 1988. The Conservative party was in power and it was clear that we would eventually reach a stage where property prices would rise but housing benefit would not keep pace. That has now come to pass. Chancellors do not write cheques to fill the gap when a private landlord raises the price. We need to answer that question.

Second, the Government must do something about the national housing benefit system. There were promises of a great reform, but I read in Sunday's newspapers that there will now be no great reform. The Government have decided that they cannot now do anything and that it is all too complicated and difficult, so the issue will be put on the back burner. I hope that that is not the case. I therefore have the following list of further questions.

First, will the Minister please ensure that his officials contact the local authorities that I named—in particular, Southwark—to ensure that the contracts are published and that all the information comes out into the open? Will he publish all the correspondence between Southwark and the Department since last October, when I raised the matter in Parliament. We shall then be able to see exactly who said what to whom and who did or did not do anything.

Secondly, will the Government please back off from insisting—this would be odd from a Labour Government, but new Labour Governments never surprise me in this respect—that everything that is efficient must be done outside the public sector and that everything that is inefficient is inefficient because of the public sector? When Southwark ran these matters itself, it did so very well; when these matters were contracted out, they were handled badly. There is a moral there somewhere, which might be that we should sometimes let councils get on with the job themselves and not force them always to contract out. I am aware of the change from compulsory competitive tendering to best value. That is progress, which I welcome. None the less, can we please take the pressure off and allow local authorities to make the choices that they think are best, rather than forcing them to contract everything out into the private sector because of a dogmatic view in central Government?

Thirdly, will Ministers ask Southwark council to apologise to Southwark residents?

Fourthly, will Ministers review the procedures and the timetable, not to make them longer, but to ensure that determinations and payments are made on time? Will Ministers ensure that the timetable works and the penalties are stronger?

Fifthly, will Ministers examine the remedies for delay? If our trains are late nowadays, we can get damages. If I do not pay my tax on time, I must pay a penalty every day that goes by. Why does no increasing penalty have to be paid if a case is not processed in 14 days? At the moment, if the 14-day deadline is missed, it gets put on one side and no one takes much notice.

Next, will Ministers please re-evaluate the verification process? Of course we want to eliminate housing benefit fraud. However, if we introduce provisions that suddenly put the whole national system into crisis, something is wrong with the planning and practice of the implementation.

Lastly, will Ministers please note that I shall respond to inquiries in a simple way from now on, as other colleagues probably will? I shall suggest that people with a complaint seek payment from the ombudsman of the fullest possible remedies—£100 if they get a notice seeking possession, £250 if the case goes to court and £50 if they get a warning letter. The cost to the public purse will increase more and more because of an incompetent system.

Sometimes people ask why some of us are anti-Labour. Some of us are anti-Labour because our experience of Labour local and central Government and that of many of our constituents is so appalling. This is a disgrace and must not be allowed to continue. I hope that any remedy takes effect sooner than the promised

[Mr. Hughes]

remedy of a year ago. Since that promise, things have got worse, not better. I shall return to the issue until we get adequate answers.

1.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Simon Hughes) knows the procedures of the House well, and it is unfortunate that I am left with six minutes in which to answer 24 minutes of charges. Obviously, I cannot do as much justice to the hon. Gentleman's serious questions as I would have done if he had left longer for my reply.

In an attempt to be helpful, I should say that I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman raised such an important issue. At the start of his speech, he described some extremely worrying individual cases and raised issues with which all of us in the House would want to deal. He made some trenchant criticisms of everyone, including his local authority, the Government and contractors. In fact, he said that he was sick of the council, the Government and the contractors. However, with great respect to him, making charges against others and spotting the errors is the easy part. The Government want to find the solution, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman does, too.

The hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that it would have been a good idea to return the Southwark housing benefit system to the previous contractor. I do not think that he is suggesting that it would be a good idea to return it to an in-house bid, although he raised the possibility later in his speech.

We need to address ourselves to what the Government are doing and to examine the extent to which our programme to tighten up and to squeeze fraud out of the housing benefit system will solve the problems that the hon. Gentleman raised. We must work in partnership with local authorities on housing benefit to achieve our aim of a modern and effective welfare state that is secure against fraud and abuse. Of course, housing benefit must be fitted within the Government's wider policy objectives and our wider housing policy of providing a decent, affordable home for everyone. I agree with the hon. Gentleman on that.

We are already putting in place policies to increase the administrative efficiency of housing benefit, to combat fraud and to improve work incentives for people who are out of work and who therefore claim housing benefit. We shall introduce further proposals as part of our housing Green Paper, which will be published in due course.

In the couple of minutes that I have left, I want to talk about some of the things that we are doing. We have introduced remote access terminals or RATs—that is the only acronym that I quite like—in local authorities to give them controlled but direct access to information that is held on Department of Social Security computer systems. Some 400 local authorities, including the London boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth, have the terminals. If they make adequate use of those that they have and want additional ones, those will be made available. We are considering providing more information than we currently provide through those terminals.

We are taking action to cut down on the paper chase. Millions of bits of paper flow between housing benefit administrations and the Benefits Agency. The large volume of paper transactions contributes to delay and errors. We have carried out tests, which show that we can achieve significant improvements in housing benefit clearance times by transferring information electronically. We are currently piloting the scheme in 20 local authorities and intend to roll it out in the new year for local authorities as a whole.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned best value. From April next year, we are introducing a duty on councils to obtain best value. That is a key part of our drive to modernise local government in ways that allow local authorities to measure their achievements. Best value will replace the discredited system of compulsory competitive tendering.

The hon. Gentleman asks me to take specific actions, including requiring the local authority to publish certain documents. That is a matter for the local authority, although the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have sent the benefit fraud inspectorate to inspect Southwark. I shall ensure that the inspectorate gets the *Hansard* report of this debate so that all the hon. Gentleman's representations to me will be made to the inspectorate. If he wants to make further representations to it, he is perfectly at liberty to write to me—

It being Two o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the sitting, without Question put.*

Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 December 1999

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Modernising Government White Paper

[*Relevant document: The evidence taken by the Select Committee on Public Administration from the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 23 November (HC 40-i).*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

2.30 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): This is the first occasion on which the Government have opened a debate in this Chamber. Ministers have come here to answer questions on other aspects of business, but it is the first time that the Cabinet Office has initiated a debate here.

I hope that we shall have an interesting debate on the modernisation of government, especially here in this new, modern setting. We shall have to wait and see whether this setting will work, after receiving feedback from our colleagues. It seems rather strange, and somewhat European. I said that to see what Conservative Members would do when I mentioned the word "European". It might wake them up.

I hope that we shall have a lively debate on the Government's proposals for modernisation. I shall go through the programme, putting flesh on the bones of the concepts and principles, and explaining specifically how we intend to roll out that programme and achieve our objectives. We are pledged to simplify government, and to bring it closer to the people whom we serve. This debate will give Members on all sides of the Chamber the opportunity to express their views on the modernisation of government. I hope that they will also give us ideas from their perspective as Members of Parliament in their own communities, about how modernisation is working on the ground to bring together local government, national Government, and the public, private and voluntary sectors in the delivery of services in our communities.

When we published the White Paper in the spring, it was a serious attempt at radical reform. The vision that it set out contained four key elements. The first is better policy making: the importance of working across Government with each other and with stakeholders to provide opportunities to develop medium and long-term policies and to deal with policy issues in the short term.

The second element is improved quality and responsiveness of public services—an important factor in a society in which people increasingly want services provided 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The third element is the harnessing of information technology for the public good, to provide access to a range of new services through the development of IT. The fourth is the valuing of public services, by investing in the skills and aspirations of public servants and in how those services are designed to be delivered.

This Government have a different perspective from the previous Government, who did not value public servants or the principle of lively, modern public services. There has been a sea change in the approach to the modernisation of government. We are excited at the prospect of introducing these changes with colleagues across central and local government. The programme will make a real difference to people's lives. It is a long-term programme, but we have made a good start. I shall give some examples of what we are already doing.

We have set out a number of key commitments in the White Paper and in the action plan that we subsequently produced. We are delivering on all of those. I shall risk repeating myself: this is an ambitious, long-term programme. We need, therefore, a strategic approach to ensure that the programme is rolled out across the board and have identified six catalysts for action over the next 12 months or so. They are the roll-out of a complete framework for good policy making and an independent review of its implementation; the establishment of effective business planning throughout the public sector, building on the 2000 public spending round and the ensuing public service agreements; a review of the way in which all public services are delivered to bring about continuous improvement in quality and service standards and ensure that services are responsive to the needs of the citizen; the development of a corporate IT strategy, which aims to achieve robust targets for the availability of, use of and satisfaction with electronic services; and a programme to modernise the civil service. There is also a major programme for modernising management across other parts of the public sector.

Some may say that policy making is sometimes a bit dull, but I rather enjoy it—especially when I get my own way. The Conservatives are certainly not having a dull time working out their ever more extreme policies. No doubt we shall hear more about those later. We are turning our pledges into reality. We are helping people into work and tackling poverty. We are attacking the poverty that the Conservatives created. We are improving the education of our children and the health of our nation. We are reducing crime. We are creating a stable economic environment for people to invest in and so create employment opportunities. We are making a difference to people's lives through the provision of new services in the national health service and other parts of the public sector. We have harnessed the Government machine to deliver those pledges and have promised to improve effectiveness in delivering the results that make a practical and quantifiable difference to people's lives.

In June this year, we established a centre of excellence in policy making—the Centre for Management and Policy Studies—which is leading a drive to identify and spread good policy-making practice. That involves developing the civil service into an organisation that learns new ways of doing things and introducing reviews of how individual Departments make policy so that we can see how we are doing. Such major changes take time. However, the centre has already run innovative programmes—for example, a unique interchange programme for senior European public and private sector figures to share ways of doing things, an induction programme for new Ministers, the first ever departmental peer reviews in respect of the Cabinet Office and the Inland Revenue, and a Treasury review of

[Mr. Ian McCartney]

public service agreements. Such programmes will provide an innovative means for the civil service to learn about better ways of doing things. We are also open to learning new ways of doing things as we drive forward policies to improve people's lives.

Our key policy priorties have concerned education. We are taking steps to improve educational policy through the literacy and numeracy strategies, tackling failing schools, promoting success in delivering lifelong learning—for example, the introduction of the university for industry and individual learning accounts.

Our economic policies have brought about lower interest rates, lower business taxes and an end to boom and bust economics.

We are supporting families by making work pay through the introduction of the national minimum wage and the working families tax credit. Hon. Members opposite are opposed to those two measures. They have made a commitment to abolish the national minimum wage, which would lead to a wage cut for more than 2 million workers, and to abolish the working families tax credit, which would mean a tax rise for more than 2 million families. The party opposite is in the business of trying to undermine our strategic approaches—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but in the spirit of the new arrangements in Westminster Hall, hon. Members whom he might assume to be opposite him may not in fact be opposite—they may even be behind him.

Mr. McCartney: In new Labour we are sometimes surrounded by all kinds of party. I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall get used to this new environment eventually, and perhaps even get friendly with the hon. Member opposite.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): You owe me a drink, McCartney.

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Gentleman is trying to put me off my stride.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): In the spirit of Westminster Hall debate, the Minister will recall that he and I were members of the Standing Committee that considered the National Minimum Wage Bill. I do not recall the point during the passage of that Bill at which I stated that the Conservative party was pledged to abolish the minimum wage, yet the Minister stated that as a matter of fact. Would he care to give me the relevant reference?

Mr. McCartney: I was referring to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who has repeatedly made it clear that the Conservative party is opposed and would abolish the minimum wage. That is on the record in *Hansard*. Can you confirm that you have reversed that policy, and thereby lay to rest the fear among workers who claim the minimum wage, that if the Conservative party were ever to return to power it would give them a wage cut by abolishing the minimum wage?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Although we are in a new, informal setting, the rule about referring to hon. Members in the third person still applies. If the Minister says "you", he is referring to me and I have had nothing to do with the White Paper.

Mr. McCartney: If you do not mind my saying so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is a typical politician's answer—nothing to do with me, guv.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to the Minister and I would not dream of trying to delay him when he is talking about important matters in the White Paper. My right hon. Friend and I were opposed to the introduction of the minimum wage, but we have not taken forward the question of what we propose to do after the next election, which is a different matter. Although the Minister referred to the creation of policy, he will note that the common-sense revolution has not yet addressed the issue.

Mr. McCartney: To assist the hon. Gentleman, I shall quote from *Hansard* when the right hon. Member for Wokingham said:

"I have endlessly stated a very clear position. We oppose the national minimum wage."—[*Official Report*, 29 April 1999; Vol. 330, c. 541.]

Angela Smith (Basildon): The Minister may recall that he, I and the hon. Gentleman spent many hours together, including a couple of nights, discussing the matter in the House. We can be forgiven for thinking that the Conservatives oppose the national minimum wage because they fought tooth and nail against it, opposed it every step of the way and even argued that disabled people and pensioners should not receive a minimum wage.

Mr. McCartney: I remember well those nocturnal events in the Chamber. We were proud to set a record for keeping the House up for a continuous period in Committee to ensure that the minimum wage was delivered on time. My hon. Friend is right to say that the Conservatives fought tooth and nail to prevent it from being introduced. They said that it would cost a million jobs, but 700,000 new jobs have been created since the National Minimum Wage Bill was introduced in the House. More than 90 per cent. of employers believe in the principle of a national minimum wage. Conservative policy has again been shown to be at the extreme end of British politics with no one supporting it.

Mr. Lansley: The spirit of modernisation in this context surely means not fighting the battles of a previous Standing Committee, but understanding the implications of what has occurred since the introduction of the national minimum wage. I wonder whether the Minister is aware of the statement by the chairman of the National Care Homes Association, who spoke recently on the impact of the national minimum wage and the working time regulations. He said:

"Government must be aware of the precarious state of the sector"—

the care home sector—

and the threat that is posed to the elderly people we care for by home closures".

Does the Minister at least recognise that we should debate the impact of the national minimum wage rather than ideology, which he is still debating?

Mr. McCartney: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman referred to the care home sector. Since the Government came to power, huge and significant new resources have been pumped into community care, including care for the elderly in both public and private sector care homes. The Government have acted to improve the quality of care for those in care homes and the standard of care from employers to their employees. It is unacceptable to pay people £1.20 an hour in a care home and expect them to pay for their own training, and then to expect a first-class service for the most vulnerable in the community. I am pleased that the majority of care home owners have responded positively to the introduction of the minimum wage and paid holidays for staff. Those are basic minimum standards.

I remember that when I was a member of the Opposition Front-Bench team on health I was invited to conference after conference to discuss the parlous state of the care home sector because of the way in which the previous Conservative Government had hiked up interest rates. When people borrowed money to open new homes, they were left financially ruined because the Conservative Government, for ideological reasons, withdrew resources from local authorities for care home support. The previous Government's record on the private care sector was nothing short of shambolic. The present Government have improved standards, invested in education and training, and invested in skills to ensure that those who need care because they are vulnerable are protected by good standards. The Government are working with local authorities and the private sector to drive up standards by providing decent pay and conditions.

Mr. Lansley: It is a pity to stop the Minister when he is in the middle of speech No. 17B, which I have heard before. With regard to care homes, will he acknowledge that, in the context of this debate, the much-vaunted phrase "joined-up government" ought to apply? If the Government want a given wage level or a restriction on working time, that will have an impact on costs. Why has the Department of Social Security increased rates for residential care for 2000–01 by 1.4 per cent., and rates for elderly residential care by just 1.5 per cent? That increase does not recognise the costs incurred in meeting the Government's policy. If the Government will the end, they must also, through the DSS, will the means.

Mr. McCartney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for speech No. 22C, which I have heard before, but which does not get any better. I would have expected him to tweak it by showing some concern for the needs of those in the care sector. The Conservative party is prepared to put at risk the standards that we have set with regard to employers' duty towards employees and the independent assessment of care provision. Clearly, Conservatives oppose all modern methods of management in this sector.

We promised that services would be organised around the needs of the people who use them. We promised high-quality services that would be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, where there was the demand. We promised that, by the end of 2000, everyone in the country would be able to telephone NHS Direct, 24 hours a day, for health care advice from experienced, qualified nurses. By 2001, jobseekers should be able to look for and apply for jobs through the Employment Service anywhere in England, Scotland and Wales, by telephone or internet, even during evenings and at weekends. In at least half of local authorities, older people should benefit from joined-up services and integrated planning by the end of 2000.

We are also transforming old methods to give Government a modern, helpful and friendly face. We have launched pilot schemes to provide a single point of contact with the benefits system, which combine in a single place the services of the Benefits Agency, the Employment Service and local authorities' benefit departments. We have created NHS Direct, which provides health advice and information over the telephone and, from 7 December, direct into people's living rooms. During its first 24 hours, the new internet service received 1.5 million hits from people looking for help and advice from NHS Direct.

We are listening to the needs of people in respect of public services. For example, we launched a nationwide programme of "listening to older people" events, and a series of "listening to women" events, on which a report was published in October. We have introduced new service standards for waiting times and the time taken to answer telephone calls, and for the introduction of e-mail inquiry points.

Unnecessary bureaucracy deters innovation and stops staff delivering a better service to the public. We are piloting learning labs in the Benefits Agency, Customs and Excise and the Prison Service, where certain non-statutory rules will be waived so that staff can try new working methods. In September, we joined forces with TNT to launch an award for high standards of service through use of the excellence model in a partnership environment.

We have created service action teams. In October, I launched the service teams action plan, which set out how we provide co-ordinated public services quickly on matters such as changes of address, long-term care in the home, retirement, bereavement and access to information on services. The action plan is not the end of the matter, but the beginning. We are developing responses to the problems that our "mystery shoppers" identified as the most pressing. For example, in October, access pages were launched on the internet, containing contact details on a range of central Government helplines, including telephone numbers, service hours and direct links to websites.

The public wants services to be available for longer—on occasion, up to 24 hours a day and for seven days a week. In March, we shall announce the results of the research of the people's panel, which will cover five services for which there is the greatest demand from the public for extended opening hours. We shall try to meet that demand by the end of 2001.

Today, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office launched a Cabinet Office website, which contains a new directory of information about the main Government help lines. It contains details about

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opening hours, phone numbers and e-mail addresses. It is easy to understand—for example, it refers to tax rather than to Inland Revenue.

Now that I appear in public life, I put much effort into using plain language. There are many ways to use language, but most of them make it more complicated. We are working with the Plain English Campaign and with ethnic minority communities to improve the worst examples, such as the application form for a driving licence for a minicab driver that includes a photograph. We are also training people to draft documents in plain language. In February, we shall publish best practice guides about using plain language, and we shall work with ethnic minority language services to help those seeking advice about Government services to have access to minority language services.

Our proposals about changing address will make a significant difference to the lives of many people—for example, a gentleman who is disabled by multiple sclerosis and who changes his address in a move that is arranged by his local authority so that he can be nearer his family. Which bodies does he need to notify of the new address in order to keep his benefits? First, he has to notify his previous Benefits Agency office of his new address either in writing by using the appropriate form or by writing a letter. In most cases, that information will be made available to all Department of Social Security agencies. If the Benefits Agency knows that he is claiming housing benefit, it will pass on that information to the relevant body. His disability benefits are likely to remain in payment and his income support may remain in payment, but his housing benefit will cease. That is the first notification.

That person must also notify his old local authority of the fact that he has moved and he must tell the new authority of his new address. He may also have to send a separate notification to the housing and council tax benefit section, which deals with liability for council tax, and the local social services department. Those steps involve a further five notifications.

The person will have to make a fresh application to claim income support at his new local office, although his circumstances may not have changed materially. He will be able to reclaim housing benefit from his new local authority at the same time, but if he does not do so he will have to put in a separate claim that contains details about his income to the Benefits Agency, although it already holds those details.

If the person is able to drive, he must notify the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency of his new address, which involves returning his driving licence. He must also notify the UK Passport Agency, the Inland Revenue and TV Licensing, which he might be lucky enough to be able to access through the internet.

The person might have to make a further four notifications. He might have to apply to the local authority's social services department for adaptations to be made to his new home, and he must provide evidence from his doctor that those changes are medically necessary. Social services officials will assess those needs and take down details of his income—the same details that the Benefits Agency already holds—and that help will be means-tested.

Merely in order to move house, that person might have to make 10 separate notifications of his change of address to public sector organisations. In addition, he will have many forms to fill in throughout the process.

That situation is unacceptable; there is no defence for it. The introduction of a one-stop facility to notify a change of address would be a significant step forward. We should also work with various bodies to increase the number of places at which one could make such a notification.

Our plans involve giving people a better service and better access to public services. We promised that information and communications technology will be used to provide better services to the public and that we shall not trail behind technological developments. We have set ourselves firm and measurable targets. We want 25 per cent. of Government services to be available electronically by 2002, 50 per cent. to be available by 2005 and 100 per cent. to be available by 2008.

We are already improving services to the public by using modern technology. From April this year, the Employment Service placed job vacancies on the internet. Government websites will be more informative and user-friendly under new guidelines issued by my Department's central IT unit. Our invest to save budget, which is providing £230 million over the next three years, is pump-priming modernising government projects.

The first round of the invest to save budget funded several innovative projects, including an electronic one-stop shop for land and property information, which will help to reduce house-buying delays, a pilot scheme to enable people to make applications for vehicle tax discs over the internet, and an electronic catalogue to enable public bodies to order goods more cheaply and efficiently.

In round two, 500 expressions of interest were sifted down to 175 full bids, which are now being considered. The winners are likely to include: projects that increase electronic access to services for individuals and businesses; new websites that give the public increased access to information; and projects that facilitate electronic data exchange between public bodies. Those are all important new advances.

There is no simple formula for ensuring that IT projects are a success, but we are examining experiences in the public and private sector, both here and abroad, to find out what are the key factors behind the successful delivery of projects. Early work shows that those factors include full assessment of the risks involved in a project and clear plans for managing those risks; strong contingency plans; keeping a project to a manageable scale; ensuring that both the supplier and purchaser clearly understand the aims of the project and their respective responsibilities; and building in the capacity for learning lessons from previous projects, both good and bad.

Our aim is that, within the next three years, people will be able electronically to look for work and be matched to jobs, to obtain information and advice about benefits, to apply for training loans and student support, to submit tax and VAT returns, to book driving and theory tests, to apply for regional business support grants, to be paid by Government for goods and services and to notify different parts of Government of

details, such as change of address, through a single transaction. The challenge for this Government—we believe in the value of public service and in investing in that service—is to ensure that the benefits of new technology are shared by the many, not just by the few.

I shall conclude by dealing with the issues relating to public servants. We said that we would value public services, and that includes public servants. The public service needs to be an agent of change. To do that, it needs to be innovative. Public servants must be advocates for the citizen, as well as ambassadors for the enterprise in which they work. We want more open public services—services that value people and develop their full potential. We want a civil service that values the differences that people bring to it and it must be strengthened by diversity in recruitment policies. We shall set targets for Departments to increase their numbers of disabled staff, initially in the senior civil service and, subsequently, at all levels.

We want managers to work in partnership with staff, to recogise and value the central role of their staff, and to develop a common understanding of the goals of their organisation. They should develop an agreed work culture and a shared commitment to training every individual. They should encourage and support staff to identify and enhance their skills, and promote an inclusive relationship between staff and their elected representatives. We have promised a better deal for staff and we will deliver it. We are working in partnership with the civil service unions to achieve those shared goals.

Much has been done, but much more remains to be done. I hope that today's debate will give hon. Members an opportunity to express their views about the Government's strategic approach to these matters, and I hope that I have given the Chamber sufficient detail to show that the Government do not just have a set of values that they will let lie on the shelf, but that we are actually trying effectively to implement those values.

2.58 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I share with the Minister a novel sensation in speaking in this Chamber, but it is a pleasure to be here and we shall see how it goes. We shall see if the modernisation—if modernisation it is—is an improvement, because not all progress is improvement.

I enjoyed listening to the Minister. It is always a pleasure to hear him. I hope that he will not think it too churlish of me when I say that I hoped that the Minister for the Cabinet Office would introduce the debate on the White Paper herself. It is a little more than eight months since its publication and the right hon. Lady's predecessor did not have, or perhaps did not seek, an opportunity to debate the matter. I am glad that we are debating it, but I am sorry that the Minister herself did not see the value of attending the debate.

Angela Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: It is a bit soon to give way; I shall do so in a moment. It is significant that the right hon. Lady chooses not to attend this debate. She was happy to give evidence on the subject to the Public Administration Committee. The Chairman of that Committee, the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), is present. He said to the right hon. Lady

"as you have had to think and read your way into all this"—

the "Modernising government" White Paper—

over the last few weeks, what . . . is the really key idea that you want to have a go at in all this?"

The right hon. Lady replied:

"I do not think that I can answer that fairly because I am still ploughing my way through a lot of the detail."—

That is fair enough. She continued:

"If what you are saying to me is, what is the key bit, what am I prioritising, I do not think I can give you a straight answer. But I think I can say . . . that the overall thing that drives me is simplification and commonsense."

I seem to have heard that somewhere before. Like other members of the Government, the right hon. Lady finds it advantageous to pick up on Conservative rhetoric, but not necessarily on Conservative reality. I give way to the hon. Lady.

Angela Smith: I am glad to see that the hon. Gentleman has read the minutes of the meeting of the Public Administration Committee on 23 November. Can he explain why there were no Conservative Members present to hear the Minister's evidence?

Mr. Lansley: You can hardly expect me to know the comings and goings of my hon. Friends Mr. Deputy Speaker. Unfortunately, the hon. Lady knows that such is the preponderance of the Government's majority—it is a deeply unhealthy thing—that Conservative membership of any Select Committee is rather sparse: we are spread much thinner than that of the governing party. I know that my hon. Friends on the Public Administration Committee have given full measure of service to that Committee. I often hear from them about the issues that are raised there.

I am interested in the concept of joined-up government. I wonder whether the Minister of State connected the matter with yesterday's debate in the Chamber and whether he can justify the joined-up character of Government thinking. The right hon. Gentleman set out the Government's policy to reduce the Post Office monopoly, but in the space of a few months, after he had moved on to better and brighter things, his successor had to announce that the Post Office monopoly was not going to be reduced. The talk about joined-up government is all very well and the talk about delivery is all very well, but the reality of joined-up government is a different matter.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke predominantly about technology. Modernisation in government, the process in which the Government are, purportedly engaged, is cloaked in technology. None of us wants to be slow to adopt technologies that deliver better results. There are two important themes relating to the introduction of technology that the Parliamentary Secretary may wish to consider when he replies to the debate. First, there are issues relating to access to technology and to the delivery of services through technology. When services are delivered, those accessing them may have to commit themselves to related expenditure or to buy in services. That is not always the case in respect of public services, but it can be. The cost

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of access, the availability of technology, of hardware and software, telephone access charges, call charges and, in respect of the internet, access to credit, must all be considered.

As was evident in the recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, those on relatively low incomes do not necessarily have access to bank accounts or to credit. If they work largely on a cash basis, it can be incredibly difficult for them to gain access to services if credit is required.

The second issue relates to the effectiveness of technology. It does not automatically follow that the application of new technology delivers a more effective service. From personal experience in constitutency postbags and surgeries, all hon. Members know of the difficulties that surround the Child Support Agency and are aware of its unhappy history. [*Interruption.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. The Minister must not seek to attract my attention from a sedentary position.

Mr. Ian McCartney: I was actually standing.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I was Chairman of the first Standing Committee on which the right hon. Gentleman served, so he knows that I sometimes have such trouble.

Mr. Lansley: As the Minister knows, I was not a Member of Parliament at the time in question. The Child Support Agency has an unhappy history which stretches back under previous Governments. We await evidence of what will be achieved after the introduction of new legislation, but the Government have not yet solved the continuing problems. They have not been solved on previous occasions by what were perceived to be important measures involving new technology, call centres, computerisation and so on. All hon. Members have met constituents at surgeries who have received computer-produced letters that bear no relation to their circumstances. A constituent of mine received in the space of two days eight letters dispatched by a computer system, each of which stated exactly the same thing. Such communications are the product of technology, but they are not necessarily benefits, and we must be careful about the success or otherwise of the introduction of technological systems.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): On the point about the CSA, where a letter is produced every time there is change, it is not the technology that causes the problem, but the regulations on which it was based. Such problems are caused by the interaction between regulation and technology, rather than just by technology.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. Indeed, it is not necessarily the regulations that cause such problems, but the system that operates the technology. There is a danger of technology, rather than people, driving the service. The people providing the service should have been aware that, if changes in circumstances were not dealt with quickly enough, the technology would cause eight letters to arrive on the same day, each one saying pretty much the same thing. Technology must be understood and introduced in the right way to deliver an effective service.

I am afraid that the record on the introduction of information technology is not a happy one. The Minister will be aware of the breakdown of the national insurance computer system, and that 285,000 pensioners are not receiving correct pension payments. Indeed, one third of those pensioners still have cases outstanding. He will be aware of the problems resulting from computerisation at the Passport Agency, although I shall not dwell on the matter, as the debate does not concern it. He will know that the Home Office is presently speaking about 17 major projects that it has undertaken, 11 of which have not been completed on the date that was originally estimated.

During the previous Session, I served on the Standing Committee considering the Bill that became the Protection of Children Act 1999. The Act set out to achieve a one-stop criminal records check, which was intended to be in place by December 2000. Reportedly, however, the Home Office now has so little confidence in its ability to deliver information technology systems such as those involved that the police criminal records check will perhaps not be available for another two years. The student loan fiasco that occurred during the summer is another example of such problems. It was perfectly clear in the initial stages of the new project that the software being sent out was inadequate. I remember speaking to local education authorities that were receiving weekly updates on the software.

The Minister has introduced a task force with precisely the objective of trying to tackle such issues across Government. I shall happily give way to him if he can provide some comfort about the mechanisms by which the Government will introduce further information technology systems such as those which I have mentioned.

Mr. Ian McCartney: In my speech, I set out the pillars of what the Government are now doing, not of what we are waiting to do. As well as assessing projects established under the previous Government, some of which are unworkable or have failed to work appropriately, and taking steps to get such projects on line, we have now adopted a rigorous approach involving the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. The aim is to determine the design of programmes and what they are set to achieve, and to deal with risk assessment. From now on, putting it under the carpet and hoping that it goes away—the previous Government's strategy—is not an approach that we would take. Within days of coming to power, we at the Department of Trade and Industry found and resolved the mess that they had made of the Post Office. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has exercised his mind on this matter. I am hopeful that we will soon see significant changes in the delivery of public services through communications systems that work.

Mr. Lansley: It is a pleasure to get another speech from the Minister. I look forward to the rigour of which he speaks being applied to those projects.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister made an intervention. Had it gone on too long and become a speech, I would have stopped it.

Mr. Lansley: You have greater patience than I do Mr. Deputy Speaker. Clearly, I am impatient; I want to be back on my feet as quickly as possible.

If the rigour of which the Minister speaks is not applied, I am sure that parties and mechanisms in this House, through the Public Administration Committee and the Public Accounts Committee, will ensure that the fiasco in the Home Office of the past few days, which seems to persist with all the costs that it implies, is not allowed to continue.

The White Paper is called "Modernising government". Well, modernising is an adjective with various meanings. I am struck by the fact—it is, no doubt, a manifestation of the third way—that the Government prefer not to think in what they regard as old-fashioned terms of big government and small government. Indeed, the Prime Minister's foreword to the White Paper puts that concept in the past. They do not want to talk about big versus small or interventionism versus laissez-faire, but I am afraid that we need to talk about it because that is where the manifestation of worse government is occurring under the Labour Administration.

Although we might all favour better government, that often means leaner government—a Government who do only what they need to and no more. The Labour Administration talk about better regulation rather than deregulation—the idea of abolishing regulation is a bridge too far—but, for them, better regulation means more regulation. Some 2,700 additional regulations have cost business an additional £5.25 billion. They do not need us to tell them that they have failed; they can talk to the business community. It is extraordinarily unhappy about the volume and cost of new regulation.

Ministers talk about regulation, but in the space of the past few weeks they have had to introduce a whole new package. When we look inside the package, we see not proposals to reduce regulation, but proposals to have Ministers who have a title that says that they are supposed to reduce regulation. It also proposes to establish committees and examine the costs and benefits of regulation. We do not see the reduction in the burden of regulation and the setting of regulatory budgets for Departments that is required. I hope that the Parliamentary Secretary will promise that, because Ministers must put themselves under that discipline if they are serious about deregulatory proposals.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there has been no serious change in the number of regulations that have been produced by this Government compared with the previous Government? The average is 3,000 a year for both Governments. I assume that we can expect the support of the Conservative party for the next year's regulatory reform Bill.

Mr. Lansley: There are points there. The hon. Gentleman wants to talk about the past, but I want to talk about the future. He mentions past regulations. The fact is that businesses, irrespective of what level of regulation applies to them, are concerned not with politicians debating how many additional regulations we place on them, but with politicians reducing the number of regulations.

If the Parliamentary Secretary studies the common-sense revolution, he will discover a pledge to reduce the burden of regulation over the lifetime of a Parliament. That will be achieved only by setting regulatory budgets with independent compliance cost assessment, and by understanding from independent assessment the impact of regulation, and by being prepared when necessary to consider the experience of regulation. We discussed the experience of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. Such experience should be considered; it should be asked whether compliance cost assessments produced by Departments were proved correct. It will often be found that the cost was significantly underestimated and the benefits overestimated. In those circumstances, one must be prepared to get rid of regulations and to set an overall limit.

You would not expect me to dwell at length, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the deregulation and contracting out legislation that the Minister proposes to introduce next year. We shall consider it, but given that Ministers are proposing to give themselves the power to introduce regulations that increase burdens on some areas to try to reduce burdens on other areas, we shall be critical. The overall effect of deregulation should be to cut regulations rather than impose them. We shall also consider seriously the question of moving from enforcement orders to codes of practice. Enforcement bodies should be subject to orders rather than codes—codes are easily altered and orders are, in theory, the right direction in which to go. I shall not give the Parliamentary Secretary the comfort that he seeks.

I have been encouraged by my desire to hear deregulatory proposals from the Government to pursue the issue at length. However, the situation is symptomatic of a general issue about Government. Complex issues associated with Governments often are not susceptible to centrally determined solutions. I do not regard our desire to pursue limited government—the least government and the best-working government—as an ideological pursuit. I regard it as being eminently practical. If any Adminstrations have demonstrated such an approach, Conservative Administrations have. We have tried to tackle the deep-seated social issues that have bedevilled us. For example, we have achieved considerable economic advancement and increased the overall wealth of the country, without necessarily seeing those achievements translated into the resolution of social problems.

The recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report made interesting reading on that point. It illustrated the fact that the economic growth and increasing employment that resulted from the Conservative legacy, from which the Government have benefited, have not necessarily translated into a reduction in poverty or inequality. The report referred to the first year of the Government, in which poverty and inequality rose, even though the economy and employment were growing fast. We are dealing with complex social issues that, as the foundation notes, are not susceptible to Government solutions resting on Government expenditure, legislation and control. The common-sense revolution is based on a principle—I commend it to the Minister as being applicable to the modernisation of government—of giving leadership to local organisations, giving freedom to individuals, families and their communities, giving leadership to

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communities and neighbourhoods and letting local government and communities give leadership instead of central Government being prescriptive.

I shall give the Minister a practical example. Local government should not have to respond to a central Government's prescriptions through an extension of the public service agreement. Rather, local government should be given the ability to set its own agenda and to determine it own priorities—to set for itself the measures against which it must be tested by the local community. The proposals currently being worked on by the Treasury and, perhaps, by the Minister of State, would turn local government into agencies of central Government. It would have to pursue the central—Labour—Government's ideas of what it ought to be doing across the country rather than setting local government priorities from what is set at not only local government but, preferably, community and neighbourhood levels.

Mr. White: Under the previous Conservative Government, the Local Government Association and its predecessor organisations used to meet Ministers. It was always rare for more than one or two Ministers from the Department of the Environment to be present and for other Departments to be represented. The Government have met the LGA on several occasions, and the LGA has been involved in a number of working groups. How does that square with the hon. Gentleman saying that the LGA is actively involved under this Administration, but was not under the previous one?

Mr. Lansley: It is symptomatic that every time I talk about what we ought to do now and in future, Government Members think that they should talk about what happened in the past.—[*Interruption.*] This time the Minister is seated. Now he is on his feet—I knew that there was a difference.

Angela Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: No, I shall move on. I do not wish to take up too much time because other Members want to speak, and I have much to say.

Better government is not just about the delivery of services; independence and accountability are also at the heart of the process. The right hon. Gentleman said a lot about technology, but not much about accountability, and still less about independence. We have heard a great deal over the past few months about the politicisation of the civil service: Ministers unwilling to contemplate an independent statistical service; Ministers pursuing a 20 per cent. increase in Government advertising in the first year in order to pursue their political agenda; and all but two directors of communication in Government Departments leaving within the first two years.

Andy Wood, who was director of communications for the Northern Ireland Office, said that the Labour Government press machine would become

"Some pale imitation of the nepotism and patronage-ridden machine"

that characterised America. The number of special advisers has trebled. The Prime Minister said that his chief press officer had done an effective job of attacking the Conservative party, as if that were the proper role of even a temporary civil servant, let alone of someone who occupies so significant a position in the Government information machine. I also note that the post of head of attack at Millbank tower was advertised, and that the Labour party made it clear in the advertisement that there would be high-level connections between the head of the attack unit at Millbank—a party appointment—and civil servants involved in the No. 10 policy operation.

The right hon. Gentleman knows that I have been around Whitehall and the party machines in the past, and I was always clear about where those distinctions lay. I fear that Ministers and civil servants are now neither clear nor comfortable about them. Will the Minister explain why the Labour party machine is advertising for someone who will clearly be working on a political basis with civil servants?

Mr. Ian McCartney: I give the hon. Gentleman a commitment that I have not read his personal file from his days in the civil service. I am sure that it would make interesting reading.

It is nonsense to suggest that the previous Conservative Government were not politicising. They put the full-time chairman of the Conservative party into the Cabinet. Their Deputy Prime Minister did nothing but Conservative party business. They introduced special advisers who tried to boss their way round the civil service, politicising and introducing the Conservative party line.

This Government have introduced an opening up of the process, a clarity of responsibility between politicians and the civil service, and a re-engagement with the need to value civil servants, their advice and their help. We value the support of the civil service. The hon. Gentleman's colleagues did none of that when they were in government, nor would they in future. I do not know why the hon. Gentleman wants to have a debate about Labour party special advisers. He obviously does not like the fact that a good Government are operating very well, and that the public think that we are doing well, too. However, we are not complacent.

Mr. Lansley: I could dwell on that matter for some time. The right hon. Gentleman knows that I was principal private secretary to a chairman of the Conservative party as well as to a Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. I was a civil servant responsible for making sure a Minister was keeping separate his party and his Government responsibilities. He was paid not by the taxpayer, but by the party.

The Minister and his colleagues engage in many political activities—I sometimes wonder whether they spend more of their time on party political activities than on Government activities. The Labour party does not appear to be willing to pay ministerial salaries according to the extent to which Ministers engage in party activity. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should move on.

The Minister challenged me to say what was happening as a consequence. Time does not permit a full answer, but rather than delivering, the Government have talked about delivery. That involves not joined-up government but an excess of reviews. There have been

500 reviews so far, and, we now discover, 318 task forces have been established. The social exclusion unit is backed up by 18 policy action teams. A plethora of activity functions as a substitute for achievement.

The Minister knows that this is one of my bugbears. It is not good enough for the Government merely to talk about target setting. The Minister did so this afternoon—he said that 25 per cent. of Government services should have electronic delivery by 2002, 50 per cent. by 2005 and 100 per cent. by 2008. Targets do not necessarily involve delivery. Many such targets are offered as a substitute for delivery.

I know precisely what game the Minister and his colleagues are playing—it is called, "In a year or so's time". Instead of explaining what they have achieved during the past three or four years, they point to the targets that they have set for four or five years hence. That is why Ministers' rhetoric involves talk of 10, 15 or 20-year targets—they are a substitute for explaining what the Government have achieved during the past two and a half years. This year has been a year not of delivery, but of non-delivery.

I have examined the Government's annual report in detail. I shall not plagiarise what my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said yesterday during Prime Minister's Question Time, but the Minister may recall that I, too, have discussed the integrated transport policy. Littered through the Government's annual report are references to supposed delivery. Of 177 so-called pledges, only 45 have been met, 33 have failed, 45 have been fudged and 54 have not yet been delivered. That is a sad catalogue of failure to deliver.

The Government have not increased their delivery as time has gone by—the number of reviews has multiplied. Some of the worst cases are like chickens coming home to roost. Only one week ago, the Prime Minister made a big thing about dealing with long-term care. The traditional approach involves establishing a commission—in this case, a royal commission—to show how important the issue is. However, when the royal commission reports, the Government take nine months to say, "Well, we do not know what we are doing to do. We shall look at the matter further." When targets are substituted for action, the public lose out.

In the time that remains, I want to emphasise what needs to be done. We need to reform not only particular policy but the structure of government and how it should be delivered. That does not simply involve de-layering government or—to give the Minister a graphic example—squashing the pyramid. The civil service is quite a narrow pyramid with many layers. When I was a grade 7 civil servant, I worked on the public spending round in the Department of Trade and Industry. Every time I saw the Minister, I was accompanied by the assistant secretary, the under-secretary, the deputy secretary and the permanent secretary. During conversations between a grade 7 civil servant and the Minister, four other civil servants kept an eye on proceedings. I suspect that things may have changed since then.

There is a good argument for de-layering the civil service and for ensuring that those who do the work have direct contact with Ministers. The relevant responsibilities should be pushed down the system. We must ensure that we do not fight the management battles of the last decade; we must prepare for the management challenges of the next decade. The Minister knows that that involves not squashing or flattening the pyramid but having distributed systems of management. In view of the way in which centres of activity are connected to each other, perhaps we should consider not a pyramid, but a pizza. We will not solve the problems of government by setting up reviews and task forces outside the structure of Government Departments—the co-ordination of decisions has to take place inside the Government. It will not happen as a result of deconstructing Cabinet government, which is the basis through which interdepartmental co-ordination should be happening, and also the basis on which Government accountability should be delivered. It will not be achieved by having bilateral discussions in the Prime Minister's study, which is apparently everybody's fond hope.

I noted a reference in Kavanagh and Seldon's volume which is relevant in that respect. A member of the Prime Minister's staff described him as "a big picture man", and was further quoted as saying:

"'If it is not on his agenda or in his big picture, then he cuts it out.'"

The authors add that a Cabinet Office official, on reading an early version of the book, added:

"'Yes, and potentially fatally so'".

The solution lies not in deconstructing Cabinet Committees and Cabinet government, but in working through Cabinet government while having better systems of management inside the Government.

The Minister spoke about the structure of the civil service. Conservative Members share some of his objectives in that regard. He was typically uncharitable about previous Conservative Administrations, but I assure him that my colleagues in the Conservative party value the role of the civil service. We are in the business not of wanting more or fewer civil servants, but of wanting only the minimum amount of government that is necessary, together with less regulation, less control and less tax. However, given that we have civil servants, they must deliver quality policy making, quality administration and quality management—indeed, they are often capable of doing so. Many values inside the civil service could easily be undermined by the way in which the Government are going about their activities. They are undermining the independence and impartiality of the concept of a disinterested public service that is not tied to the political priorities of a particular Administration.

Even the civil service should accept that an appreciation of risk is necessary. Civil servants should understand that there must be downsides as well as upsides—it is not just a matter of performance bonuses for delivering particular objectives. They should know, as those in the private sector know only too well, that if they do not deliver there will be a downside to balance the upside when they do deliver.

We should not blur the boundaries of what civil servants are responsible for. Ministers are responsible for policy. Policy failures that were not the civil service's responsibility are littered across the pages of the Government's annual report and their record in general. In the summer, the Prime Minister sought to divert attention away from his—and his ministerial

[Mr. Lansley]

colleagues'—failure to deliver and towards setting performance targets for permanent secretaries, as if they were responsible for the delivery of Government policy. That was not right.

Two things about the civil service should be clear cut—where accountability lies and the difference between Ministers' responsibilities and civil servants' responsibilities. It seems that civil servants who appear before Select Committees are increasingly responsible, in a personal sense, for the explanation of their administration. That should not happen if Ministers' statements about setting the policies to which their civil servants work have previously been clarified.

The Government's proposals on freedom of information cut directly against precisely that kind of open accountability. The class exemptions that the Government are proposing mean that we will not be able to see where the difference lies between what Ministers are responsible for—because they took the decisions—and the basis on which civil servants gave factual advice or advised about the practicability of a particular body. Those lines of accountability must be clear.

The civil service must be able to support its values of impartiality and independence as well as seeking to foster additional new values that set standards for employment as a whole. The Minister discussed diversity in terms of ethnic minorities and disabled people in the civil service. In my experience, the civil service strives in that respect to be as good an employer as one could fine anywhere. However, it still does not succeed in that respect, which illustrates the need for it to continue down that path, with our support. I read with great care the Schneider-Ross report, which was useful in illustrating the nature of the problem, and I have also seen the illustration from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions about the subjectivity of assessments and performance assessments of staff.

However, neither that problem, nor the problem of promotion within the civil service, will be solved simply by improving the civil service's recruitment procedures among ethnic minorities and other groups. We must focus on the extent to which people in the civil service from diverse groups are progressing on merit. I should be grateful if the Minister would respond to that point. We want not recruitment fairs and objective measures of recruitment, but objective assessment throughout the civil service, so that quality recruits can make progress at an early stage. We should demonstrate as soon as possible that ethnic minority candidates are capable of reaching senior positions such as permanent secretary.

Delivery is the test of government, but time does not permit me to list in detail the ways in which the Government have failed to deliver. I am afraid that matters are deteriorating. Class sizes have risen, waiting lists have risen, and crime is starting to rise. Britain is being brought to a standstill by a transport policy that simply is not working. Taxes have risen and regulation has increased; the burdens have increased and the benefits have decreased.

It is no good the Prime Minister talking about scars on his back from the failings of the civil service—he cannot deflect attention elsewhere. The failures are policy failures. The Government are talking about change in the civil service, but that change must be independent and impartial. Technology should be service-orientated and cater for the public's needs. We must work for people's benefit, rather than technology's benefit. We must ensure that the civil service is not only accountable, but able to deliver the service that the public want.

3.36 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I welcome the Minister to Westminster Hall. As a new Labour arch-moderniser, I am sure that he will soon get used to it. The opportunity to debate matters in a different style will prove valuable to us all.

Liberal Democrats welcome the White Paper's title: no one could possibly object to modernising government. I could find no reference in it to the national minimum wage, care homes or several other issues to which reference has been made, so I shall not discuss them. Modernising government and making it more accessible are good ideas, as are making it more efficient, accountable and focused on the public's needs. No one could object to such aims. In short, the White Paper is full of apple pie and motherhood. Since it was written, progress on the motherhood policy has perhaps been unexpectedly rapid.

Page 7 of the White Paper refers to "five key commitments", and I shall pick out some of the important issues arising from those five bullet points, or helpings of apple pie. Under the heading "Information age government", the document states:

"we will use new technology to meet the needs of citizens and business, and not trail behind technological developments."

That is an excellent aim, but one doubts whether this or any Government can turn those words into reality.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) mentioned in passing the Child Support Agency. A constituent of mine received 17 letters from the CSA in one week. On taking up the matter, I was told that the cause of the problem was not the regulations, but the computer programme. Every time that a line of data was entered and the return button was pressed, a letter was automatically printed out. There were also the Benefits Agency and pensions payments fiascos. There were problems with the Passport Agency's computer, and the immigration and nationality directorate's computer. There was the fiasco surrounding the smart card technology introduction programme, which has been abandoned, and the medical department at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. There is a long list of failed projects which have had a serious impact on precisely the citizens and businesses that should have benefited from the new technology and should benefit in future.

If information-age government is considered in another context—a broader, non-IT framework—the Government are not delivering and it is not clear from the White Paper that they intend to deliver. Freedom of information is surely a vital component of the information age, but the Government are obstructing full revelation of information. We are a million miles short of the freedom of information Act that we should have. As the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said, policy advice will not be disclosed. There will not

even be disclosure of historical records. One of my hobby horses is to have much more rapid publication of historical records and Cabinet papers. Some of the limitations currently in place are unnecessary and outrageous. The Government are a long way short of achieving their key commitment on information-age government.

Another key commitment refers to public service and states:

"we will value public service, not denigrate it."

I suppose that, at face value, that means a commitment to pay nurses a sensible rate so that London will not suffer the current problems of recruitment. It presumably means not slagging off teachers as being the forces of conservatism. It presumably means providing appropriate rewards for civil servants and, perhaps, for Cabinet Ministers, who are currently subject to a pay freeze. On the other hand, bearing in mind the comments of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) during a recent debate in the Chamber when he referred to Cabinet meetings taking up six hours a week of Cabinet Ministers' time in his day and now taking 30 minutes, perhaps that pay freeze is correct.

We must consider not only the practical issue of what we mean by valuing public service, but the subliminal messages about it. What have the Government tried to do in valuing public service? We have fewer police, national health service waiting lists are stuck and secondary school class sizes are at an historic high. There are serious gaps in the Government's plan to make the valuing of public service a key commitment.

There is a reference in the five key commitments to setting

"new targets for all public bodies, focusing on real improvements".

I shall refer to the police service as an example. I asked a question in the House about police efficiency and the Greater Manchester police service and the answer stated:

"This Government's Comprehensive Spending Review has set the police a 2 per cent. year on year efficiency target from April 1999.—[*Official Report*, 7 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 501W.]

I also asked the Home Secretary what assessment he had made of the efficiency levels of individual police forces and the answer stated:

"There is no agreed formula for measuring police efficiency".—[*Official Report*, 7 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 501W.]

The Government are referring, as the Conservatives used to, to efficiency savings that have no benchmark, no measuring stick, no monitoring process, and which the Minister in a previous incarnation would have said were cuts.

When it comes to setting

"new targets for all public bodies, focusing on real improvements",

there is a long way to go.

The Government will have to do better than that. The House—and citizens and business—want quality public services, not the activation of cuts that were set in train by the previous Conservative Administration.

Then there is a reference to policy making being "forward looking". Both the Minister of State and the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire referred to joined-up government; there is certainly plenty of scope for improving it. As my party's spokesman on energy, I am only too well aware of the gaps and contradictions in Government policy between the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Treasury.

I could talk at even greater length about the problems that are raised by the five key commitments, but concerned as I am about the contents of the White Paper and how those five commitments are to be fulfilled, I am even more concerned about the missing commitment: the commitment not simply to modernise government, but to make it more accountable. It was said of Mussolini that he made the trains run on time, so it is certainly possible to have modern, efficient and effective government that does not connect with the real world, the real needs of the public, or with the democratic system that is supposed to sustain it.

I heard the Minister say that one of the benefits of implementing the White Paper would be electronic data transfer between public bodies. That sounds fine in a speech in Westminster Hall, but what does it mean? Are we moving towards one great computer in the sky, which will interconnect every piece of information about every citizen and every business some time in the next century? We have talked about public bodies being connected, but what about semi-public bodies or bodies that may be privatised in the future? Will the Post Office be connected? What about private providers of the second pension or the banks into which pension payments will be made? Simply making government quicker, slicker and sharper does not necessarily make it more democratic or automatically more accountable.

Parliament is slow footed and hamstrung enough by its procedures and the power of the party machines. Much accountability is bypassed and many of the checks and balances that are supposed to be in place are disconnected and sidelined. A Minister is more likely to be held to account by Jimmy Young than by the Leader of the Opposition. I do not hear anyone contradicting me. The historic role of this place is at risk unless we see, in parallel with anything that may be done as a result of this document to modernise and speed up government, measures to ensure that Parliament can keep up with the Government and maintain—and strengthen—accountability checks.

I do not deny that some improvements have been made—this very meeting place is an example of an extra opportunity to hold the Government to account and the introduction of pre-legislative scrutiny is clearly an advantage. But the system is still poor. What steps will be taken as a result of the White Paper and the ensuing legislation to modernise accountability and make it easier for hon. Members to keep track of what the Government are doing—and easier for us to stop them when they are wrong?

The power of Back Benchers in this Parliament is extremely slender. At least I have the advantage of being an Opposition Member—

Mr. White: Long may it continue.

Mr. Stunell: To be a Labour Back Bencher is surely to be without power and influence. I intend to carry on in opposition until the next general election. After that, I hope to be able to put into practice some of the accountability that this place so desperately lacks.

[Mr. Stunell]

The White Paper sets out the Government's intentions on the roles of Government Departments and of agencies. It also describes how local government fits in, how the Government will connect to local communities, to the national business community and to the media, and how they will respond to every kind of intervention and pressure. It says nothing at all, however, about how the Government will relate to Parliament or about how they will be held to account by it.

Bearing in mind that glaring omission of the sixth key commitment, the Government cannot expect to receive a blank sheet of approval from this place or its hearty endorsement. It is the job of Parliament, and especially of Opposition Members, to ensure that the Government are held to account and that scrutiny occurs. I am keen to see the whole democratic system modernised, not just the Government. That system is designed to provide, and should provide, protection for the weak and vulnerable, and it should ensure that the powerful are held to account, and it should protect the liberty of the individual.

The White Paper could be said to be a step forward in ensuring one part of that. However, reading it and thinking about it, it seems, on the contrary, that it will be a step backwards. I look forward to hearing the Minister reply to the debate, and especially to hearing assurances from the Government that, in making themselves faster, leaner, more efficient and so on, they will also make themselves more accountable and more ready to give Parliament the role that it should have in monitoring and scrutinising their performance.

3.52 pm

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): I came here today to talk about the White Paper, and to deal with some of its good and bad parts, commenting on where progress has been good and where much still has to be made. I am, however, rather depressed about the tone of the debate. In particular, I was amazed by the tirade of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), who compared his party's record in government with that of the present Government, and said that everything was wonderful when a Conservative Administration were in power. When he was challenged on the subject, however, he said that we should not talk about it and that we needed to look forward. I find that rather strange. My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) referred to the Select Committee on Public Administration, which is conducting an inquiry into innovations in government, and pointed out that no Tories had bothered to turn up at its sittings. Perhaps I should not be surprised at that.

I should like to comment on the White Paper's three aspects: pilots, culture and information technology, which has already been mentioned. I shall then speak briefly about the service action team objectives, which have recently been published on the internet.

Some good pilots are in operation. The Minister referred to jobcentre web pages, which have transformed the way in which people access jobcentres. People seeking a job are less likely to look at a web page once a week; they will look at it several times a day to see whether there are any changes, and so will find work much more quickly. People who do not want work will not look at the pages at all. The scheme has some good parts and some bad parts, as it addresses only some issues.

NHS Direct has been an especially good pilot. One of the reasons for that is that it has an end date, and that it has a clear path for translation into a permanent feature throughout the NHS. In considering pilots, that is one of the issues that the Government need to address. Sure Start is an example of a bad pilot because people in large areas of the country cannot gain access to it, despite the fact that they desperately want to, because the programme does not have as clear a target as the Department of Health identified for NHS Direct. Therefore, the Government should have a clear target in mind when they implement pilots. That links in to budgets. In the case of several successful pilots, their budgets have been built into the Department's standard budget. However—this applies particularly in local government where there is a stand-alone budget—it often proves difficult to translate an excellent pilot into full-scale services if, when the pilot is incorporated into mainstream services, the budget is not there to support it. That is the key issue for the Government.

There is also an issue with regard to how people access pilots. A classic example is a project that involved the Department of Social Security, jobcentres and local authorities. People chose to go to the jobcentre because they did not trust the Department of Social Security as a result of their previous experience of its culture, which was one of rejection and exclusion, whereas their experience of the culture at the jobcentre was one of inclusion, especially since the new deal. So people make choices about how they access services, and that has implications for the knock-on effects that pilots have on Departments.

One common criticism of pilots is the element of devolved responsibility and how that is measured. Some people take up devolved responsibility enthusiastically, ahead of their colleagues, who then have a problem relating to the pilot when it is implemented. The Government need to address those key issues, which are referred to in the White Paper, but we should also consider the experience of previous pilots. The Government should also accept that people want to introduce other pilots and should encourage rather than restrict them. I recognise the budgetary implications of that, but we need to consider from where pilots come.

That leads me on to consider the culture of the civil service and Government. During the previous Government, the Department for Education and Employment had a centralising and restrictive policy, so that every broken window and missing tile, every lack of toilet and every poor building in any school in the country was the fault of the Secretary of State. The previous Government suffered badly because of the way in which that was perceived by the general public.

Mr. Ian McCartney: It was their fault.

Mr. White: The Minister is right, but my point about how people perceive Administrations is critical. Consider the Department of Health, which used to have a similar problem with perception in relation to trolleys

in hospital wards. The reorganisation of the health service, which involved getting rid of the internal market, giving trusts and health authorities much more power and devolving power and decision making, encouraged people to take responsibility for themselves. People now accept that those reforms are working. That is the contrast between a Government who cloak themselves in regulation, and who proceed to take all the blame and none of the credit, and a Government who devolve power, take the credit and improve services.

Mr. Lansley: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I am not sure what world he is living in. The Government have abolished grant-maintained status, so schools in my constituency that used to be able to manage things like broken windows and damaged tiles on the roof now have to go through the local education authority. They do not have the same powers or devolved responsibilities. The Government have gone in the opposite direction.

Mr. White: I do not know what planet the hon. Gentleman is on. I can only refer to the grant-maintained school that my children attend. The head of that school, Stantonbury, one of the largest in the country, now thinks that the Government's reforms are best for the education of kids. They relate what the school is doing to what is happening in the community and address the overall objective of raising standards. The experience in my constituency—I cannot speak for that of the hon. Gentleman—is that the reforms are working. They are for the best and help to raise standards. The literacy hour and similar projects work and are welcomed by teachers, parents and anyone with a sensible view of education.

A major problem with innovation is how to get people to accept it. Administrations have had that problem with many projects for a long time. The White Paper does not place sufficient emphasis on how to achieve that. Implementing new projects requires clear political leadership. No doubt I am teaching my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary how to suck eggs when I refer him to the experience of local government. Those authorities with clear political leadership brought people in to make changes while those that went through the motions were not able to implement them. That critical distinction, which the Government are learning to make, must be understood if government modernisation is to work.

When we talk about modernising government, we forget the crucial role of the regulators. It was refreshing to hear the Rail Regulator at a west coast main line meeting yesterday; he understood his powers and was prepared to use them. I contrast that with Oftel which does not understand how it can influence the agenda on e-commerce.

We have talked about the need for accountability, but the fragmentation of the ombudsman system and the different complaint mechanisms needs to be addressed as part of modernising government. It would not be right to have an all-embracing ombudsman, but the interaction, for example, of the local government ombudsman and the health ombudsman, which must happen if we are to get rid of the Berlin wall between the social services and the health service, needs to be addressed. At the moment, people with complaints that involve both services have to go to both ombudsmen.

I am also concerned about language, in particular how it is used by Parliament. I doubt whether many citizens who are not lawyers can understand our laws because of the way in which they are written. If we are to modernise government, we need to modernise the language that is used in our Bills. Many Departments recognise that that is necessary for forms, but they do not apply the same strictures to their language of process.

It is important that comprehensive spending review 2 takes on board and accelerates the process of change. That is a key consideration if CSR2 is to deliver on change.

I have a couple of points to make on information and communication technology. I am worried that only public sector ICT projects appear to fail. From my work in the private sector, I know that many private sector companies have had IT failures, but they do not get the same publicity. This country is particularly bad at project management. Investing in the skills of project management would benefit the Government and the private sector. I will not dwell on the blockages that various ICT reforms are experiencing, except to say that the role of the voluntary sector in delivering access to new technology has been overlooked. The Government should give that greater priority.

A great deal of progress has been made on the service action team's action plan, which was published in October. A lot of progress has been made, but there should be an on-going process, not a one-off exercise. The current standard of web page design throughout Government lacks coherence and that should be improved.

Mr. Ian McCartney: We issued a document on the upgrading of all Government websites, which will be reviewed in March next year. If hon. Members want a copy of that, I shall circulate it to those who are in the Chamber.

Mr. White: Many of the service action teams had a wide range of people, but one area that was not well represented was that of rural issues. That is important because access in urban, suburban and rural areas is different and that needs to be addressed.

A good start has been made on modernising government. Some key issues will challenge the government in coming months, particularly how CSR2 can take the process forward and the crucial nature of political leadership in Departments. We have made a good start and the White Paper is a good blueprint, but everyone must buy into it if it is to be successful.

4.6 pm

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I was encouraged when I heard the Minister say that we would be more European and consensual, but we had a long exchange about the minimum wage, which went on for ever. We then had a dispiriting and churlish performance from the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) who was particularly ungenerous in trying to score points against the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who was not in the Chamber, about her appearance before the Public Administration Committee.

[Dr. Tony Wright]

We were delighted that, after only a few weeks in office, the Minister was prepared to come and exchange thoughts with us. It was an interesting occasion and I shall give an example of how responsive she was. When we discussed civil servants and how their experience would be enriched by secondment to the private and voluntary sectors, it was suggested that Select Committees would benefit if civil servants were seconded to them. She readily responded to that idea and wrote to me today to say that, having given further thought to the matter, it was a splendid idea and she would consider how it could be carried forward. That was an unusual response from a Minister, showing a desire to strengthen Parliament and a willingness to consider how to modernise government in general. We shall cast a veil over the attendance record of Conservative members of the Committee.

If our discussion was more European and consensual, it would have to be said that we are discussing one further instalment in a very long process of modernising government. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire would have made a better speech if he had told us about some of the building blocks in the process during the past 20 years or so. There has been a lot of reform in the civil service, and the public sector has changed out of all recognition. People find it impossible to understand who runs anything any more. I do not intend to be as negative as that sounds, but that is the effect of what we have done. Regulators have been mentioned and it is virtually impossible for people to understand who runs any public or quasi-public service. It could be argued that that does not matter so long as those services work well and something can be done when they work badly. They must have a seamless operation, but against a background of complete fragmentation. The agency process and the contracting-out process—all of the processes that we know about—have transformed the character of the public sector over the past 20 years. Our task now is to co-ordinate it again—to make it seamless—and to incorporate proper accountability. That was the unfinished business that was left over from the reform exercises.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire—this time, I refer to him more generously—quoted my question to the Minister for the Cabinet Office about the big idea. It is difficult to summarise what the big idea is in the process. The process has been going on for many years, and it will continue to do so, the result of which will be—if we get it right—that the public services will work better. That big idea is surrounded by all of the management-speak and buzz-words that make us, if we are not careful, rather cynical.

The process has acquired a momentum that it did not previously have. It would be wrong to say that there are no benchmarks or targets, or actions to set against those targets. It is unusual to have a White Paper and an action plan that includes great lists of what it calls milestones. We know what the targets are, and we are aware of the concrete measures against which the targets will be delivered. The system cannot be accused of being ethereal—it is concrete, and it is linked to a series of action programmes that require the people who work in the areas that are covered by the White Paper to deliver.

We have discussed modernising government, which suggests that we have unmodernised government. In some ways we do have that—the White Paper is good at identifying the key points of unmodernisation that need to be corrected. All government services used to be delivered by either the Government or local government, but we have come a long way since then. At that time, all that one needed to know was whether a particular function was the responsibility of the Government or of local government. I am afraid that we did not ask many questions about how good those services—whether central or local—were. When we asked, "What are you doing about education?" or, "What are you doing about health?" the answer, at best, would be, "Oh, we are spending £X million of your money in that area." That was as far as the argument about the effectiveness of public services used to go. The argument was entirely about what went in, not about what came out.

That argument also largely ignored the role of users of the services, which were provided in a top-down way. That system lacked user input and responsiveness, for which a political price had to be paid by those of us who were great believers in public services. We assumed that, if we simply told people that we believed in public services and that we were putting resources into them, we did not need to discuss how the system worked. An enormous change has taken place in that regard. We now focus on outcomes and we have to use dreadful words such as "joined-up" and "holistic" because they help us to think about government in the round. We know that problems do not come in neat departmental segments; that is not how people live their lives or experience problems. There is a mismatch between the way in which Governments organise themselves and the way in which problems arise, and part of the programme involves making a better connection between the two.

I conclude by making two or three brief points. First, I want to prove how unmodern I am. It sounds uncontroversial to say that we want all Government services to be delivered electronically by 2000. An innovation of the "Modernising government" White Paper is the people's panel, which asked:

"If you were able to use these services to deal with government, which, if any, do you think you would use?"

The overwhelming majority, 72 per cent., said that they would use telephone services. Only 25 per cent. of people over 65 think that new technology will improve Government services. We should pause for a moment and consider the gap between the ideology of modernising government and life as people live it. In many respects, this country is like a gigantic call centre in which one cannot have a conversation on the telephone with a public sector or private sector organisation, even though telephone systems are heavily staffed. Ordinary people are saying that being able to talk to someone on the telephone is rather important.

Similarly, the people's panel listed places, such as banks, where households might access government, and asked people how attractive they found each option. Sixty-four per cent. regarded the post office as the most attractive option. That should remind us that, for many people, the local post office fulfils a crucial social function. A certain mind set says, "Wouldn't it be a gee whiz idea to conduct electronic transfers through banks?" However, for many people and for a wide

variety of reasons, access to the local post office is crucial, and is an important way of interacting with the state. I offer that point as a prehistoric, unreconstructed caution, in the context of my great enthusiasm for the entire programme.

Secondly, various references have been made to freedom of information. I shall not say much about it—I could easily bore hon. Members on that subject—but, so far, the point in relation to the "Modernising government" White Paper has been largely missed. There is a complete contrast between the way in which the policy process is dealt with in that document and in the Freedom of Information Bill. The White Paper states:

"Government should regard policy making as a continuous learning process, not as a series of one-off initiatives. We will improve our use of evidence and research so that we understand better the problems we are trying to address."

That is how one should view the policy process, but one cannot make it a continuous learning process if barriers to learning are imposed and people's ability to participate is closed off. Unfortunately, the Freedom of Information Bill—which was transferred from the Cabinet Office to the Home Office, and has become a different animal—has created three different protective layers. If one gets past one layer, a second and then a third is encountered, and access to the policy process is denied.

It is not possible to engage in a continuous learning process—which, as expressed in the White Paper, is exactly the right way in which to view policy—if policy is dealt with in the manner outlined in the Freedom of Information Bill.

Mr. Stunell: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that joined-up government works only if the various parts of Government can talk to one another and take advantage of the advice and experience of the outside world? That is a problem with the current dichotomy between the Government's two proposals: they are not examples of joined-up thinking.

Dr. Wright: I may not have expressed myself as well as I intended to. The policy process will be strengthened if more people can contribute to it and evaluate the raw material on which policy decisions are based. That will improve and strengthen government, rather than weaken it.

If there is a gap in the White Paper, it centres on the word "accountability". It is surprising not to see accountability identified as a key objective of this process. The White Paper almost deals with accountability as a kind of problem, a kind of brake on what one can do. It refers to the fact that

"the cultures of Parliament, Ministers and the civil service create a situation in which the rewards for success are limited and penalties for failure can be severe."

It goes on to discuss the virtues of risk taking. I know what is being said here: it is a matter of how we can introduce more risk. In our exchanges with the Minister for the Cabinet Office the other day, she was frank enough to admit that more risk might mean more policy failure. We have to be intelligent and grown-up about that.

However, there are areas of life—whether the protection of children or making sure that ambulances run as they should—in which risk has no part to play. The reason why many of those responsibilities are in the public sector is that they are areas in which we are not prepared to play around with risk. In grasping that the role of risk has to be enlarged in the public sector, we must also be clear where the boundary lines are.

We must be clear that modernising government is not to be achieved at the expense of accountable government. That would be a profound mistake. People often have separate conversations about this: some talk in a technocratic way about modernising government and about delivery—it is important that they should, because we want efficient and effective public services—while others talk about the big accountability issues, which are also important.

It is rare to find people who talk about effectiveness and accountability in the same conversation, yet that is what we want. We need people who are committed to ensuring that we get effective and efficient services, but who know that those services must be accountable. There has been a loss of the traditional kinds of accountability as the public sector has become fragmented in the way that I have described.

If we were engaged in a less European and more partisan exercise here, I would have to remind the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire that one of the most devastating reports issued by the Public Accounts Committee during the previous Parliament was an indictment of the way in which the newly freed public bodies—quangos and the rest—had been guilty of the most extraordinary incompetence, malpractice and worse. It was a devastating account of what happens if one does not make government accountable and modernise it at the same time. Those are not separate agendas, but very much parts of the same agenda. A gap has become evident as we have moved on to talking about users of services. Although that is an advance, there is a difference between users and citizens. Citizens are people who also engage in the shaping of services. The whole agenda should properly have been dealt with by the White Paper, and I hope that it will be dealt with in due course.

I should like to return to an issue, that was briefly touched on by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire. Many of the matters that we discuss may seem to be managerial or limited by managerial considerations, but they are not. In fact, they have the most profound implications for how we organise the control of our public services. We cannot do the things that we are talking about doing in respect of the senior civil service—closely fixing and identifying performances, linking them to payments, measuring what people do—and still pretend that the civil service can continue to live under the veil of anonymity while ministerial responsibility continues to exist in its traditional form. It is inconsistent to claim that Ministers alone are responsible when, in practice, we are visibly putting mechanisms in place to ensure that civil servants are responsible. A real conflict arises in respect of the way in which the reforms are, rightly, progressing and will continue to progress after the publication of the Sunningdale conference report. It is not possible to reconcile that process, which is about making a can-do civil service in which people are responsible for their actions, with the traditional doctrine of ministerial responsibility, which provides anonymity. Those different approaches are irreconcilable. We must

[Dr. Wright]

confront that fact, because it is one of the major constitutional implications of the modernisation process.

The White Paper will come to be seen as an extremely important document and an extremely important moment in a longer process. I shall conclude on a wretchedly ungenerous note, for which I apologise. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire extolled the virtues of a leaner state. However, we have heard years of sterile argument between people on the left who say that we need a bigger state and people on the right who say that we need a smaller state, while all the time the real argument should have been about how we get a better state that does the things that it should be doing and does them well. That is the breakthrough that is expressed in the White Paper. It represents a kind of revolution, which is, typically, a quiet revolution.

4.28 pm

Angela Smith (Basildon): This is the first time that I have had the opportunity to speak in this Chamber, other than a brief intervention earlier in the week. I admit that I had reservations when it was first established, but those have now been put to rest. I have realised to my surprise that it has two great benefits. The first is to discover, when speaking, that Ministers have faces. Labour Members are used to looking at the backs of Ministers' necks. There is great benefit to be gained from seeing how the Minister's face changes as I talk. I hope that the smile on his face does not change to a frown too often.

The second benefit applies particularly to Conservative Members. When we speak in the main Chamber, with Labour Members on one side and Conservative Members on the other, shadow Ministers can look very lonely. Under these new arrangements, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) does not look nearly so lonely, having been deserted by his colleagues, because he is surrounded by Labour Members. Given the lack of Conservative Members attending the Public Administration Committee, however, he may be getting used to that.

I am surprised that some hon. Members do not fully embrace the White Paper and wish to move forward from it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) said, modernisation is about the quality of government and making better government. It is about the quality of service that we as Members of Parliament can provide for our constituents and the quality of delivery at every level of government. It is also about the public's ability to hold the Government and those in power to account.

Unless we believe that government does not matter, we must support the modernisation programme. Hon. Members may disagree with specific proposals, but we must look behind them to make sure that what really matters is what happens on the ground, how the public perceive them and how their lives are affected by them. What counts is not our debates here, and whether we wear top hats when we make points of order during a Division, or whether, with due deference to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), laws should be printed on vellum or paper, but actions. What really matters is the quality of service that our constituents receive and whether they feel that the Government are listening to them. In recent debates on the Representation of the People Bill, we discussed how to increase voter turnout, but democracy is a far wider issue than that. That is why the White Paper is so welcome.

Hon. Members of my generation will recall Snoopy cartoons. I am a fond fan of Snoopy and I used to have a car sticker that said, "If you don't vote, don't crab"—that is, if you do not take part in the process, do not complain. We want people to take part in the process, but not just by voting or complaining about something; they should feel that they are relevant to the process and that someone is listening to them. They should engage in the political system.

I have been criticised by some of my colleagues because I am always saying to constituents, "Write to your MP. Let your MP know how you feel", and I have said it publicly. By performing even that basic action, people are engaging in the political process. I want my constituents to feel that the Government listen, that they are responsive to what they hear and act on it.

I was disappointed to see that, when my right hon. Friend the Minister was speaking, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, who was sitting with a colleague, laughed and derided the notion of the Government listening to women.

Mr. Lansley: It may help to explain that we were discussing the fact that the Government had once again stolen Conservative party policy, as found in our listening to Britain programme. We were not deriding the process, merely the Government's derivative character.

Angela Smith: The hon. Gentleman's history is at fault. I remember taking part in Labour's listening to women programme when I was selected as a candidate for my constituency of Basildon. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman's actions explain why his political hero is Norman Tebbit.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire complained earlier about regulations and the burdens on small businesses. He said that he wanted to look forward, not backwards, and that a future Conservative Government—I find hard to imagine such a thing—would get rid of regulations on business. I can understand why he did not want to look back and defend the previous Government's record. His colleague, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), said that his Government had passed volumes of new rules and laws interfering in almost every aspect of business and social life, so that might explain why the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire did not want to look back.

We must consider the response of public services and make it clear how much we value them. We rely on those in the front line to deliver the services that we debate and for which we legislate. We are dependent on public servants and we must ensure that they are responsive to the public. As Senator Robert Kennedy said, "Some people look at things and say, 'Why is that?' I look for things that could be and say, 'Why not?'" I may be paraphrasing, but that is the gist of it. We have to ask why not in the context of the White Paper.

When my right hon. Friend the Minister was speaking about the different hurdles that we put in the way of people before they can get the services they need, he brought to mind a constituent of mine. She has a child with health problems that necessitated special educational support. The family also needed the help of a carer, respite care for their child and adaptations to their home. Every time the parents wanted support or help from a different agency they had to explain everything all over again. They dealt with health, social services and education departments separately, even though they are part of the same authority, with the district council and with the Benefits Agency. They had different forms to fill in and had to give the same information to many different people. It is unfair on families under such pressure to make them go through the hoops again and again. Why cannot one person visit them at home to make things easier for them? There was no lack of willingness to help in any of the agencies and there is no criticism of individuals, but the system made it dispiriting and difficult for them. There was no one place from which to obtain the information that they needed and they had to hunt it down.

I pay tribute to some of the voluntary organisations in my constituency. The community resource centre run by Maggie Viney and Linda Figg is a one-stop voluntary agency to which people can go for information, which is very helpful. I am impressed by the home start group, which was set up in the back room of the Barge pub in Basildon by Geraldine Evans, and taken over by Paula Burns. It is a one-stop shop to give people the information that they need. It, too, was undertaken voluntarily. We can learn a lot from what those people are doing and incorporate their ideas into a partnership.

Even in my constituency, people are not treated the same. The previous Government made a complete botch of local government reorganisation. That means that on opposite sides of the street people have to deal with different councils. In one case, there is a unitary authority, in another part of the constituency there is two-tier local government. Constituents find it hard to understand why someone just down the road has different delivery of services and different people to whom to talk. That must change. I welcome the Government's commitment to consultation, but the public will become increasingly wary of being consulted if there is no action at the end of the day. We must ensure that consultation is genuine and that action results from it.

I welcome the commitment in the White Paper to the people's panel. I hope that some of my constituents are involved in that project; if not, I can give the Minister a list of names and addresses of people he might like to include. The chief executive of my local authority told me about a man who complained constantly about the council. Some people thought that he was a bit of a nuisance, but the chief executive did not. He looked on the man as a resource, who told him what is happening, what people were moaning about and what they wanted to be done. We should use such resources: that man would be welcome on the people's panel.

I have been slow to grasp the benefits of new technology. I admit that it has taken me a long time to get to grips with e-mail and the internet. However, I was convinced that it was the right thing to do when I found the Widdy web on the internet, which contains a mile of information about the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). It led me to set up my own website, although I shall not call it anything like the Widdy web.

We are not making the best use of the new technology. We should use it far more than we do, although not everyone has access to internet websites. I should point out that the Conseryative party website keeps blocking my access to all sorts of things, such as press releases. It is a shame that the Conservative party does not practise what it preaches about freedom of information.

I welcome the report and the work that the Government are doing, but I want my constituents to know that we are a responsive Government; we do not just listen, we are committed to action. The White Paper takes us one step along that road.

4.38 pm

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate because the process of government is one that we would all do well to reflect upon. It is wholly appropriate that we are having a debate about modernisation in a modernised Chamber.

I make one suggestion about the arrangements: it was a rather surreal experience listening to the speech of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) and seeing on the annunciator the name of my right hon. Friend and father, the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), speaking simultaneously in another place, if I may refer to it as that. If it were possible to have an annunciator that related to the proceedings of Westminster Hall, that would be an act of modernisation in itself.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire referred to failure in delivery. That does not appear to be the electorate's perception of the Government's success in the past two and a half years, to judge by the Labour party's lead in the polls. If that represents failure, please can we have a lot more of it from Ministers.

Let me be clear and frank: not all regulation is perfect, but some is necessary. It was unwise of the hon. Gentlemen to pick on the minimum wage, because one could not ask for a better example of regulation that is necessary in the interests of protecting the weak and vulnerable, of whom the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) rightly spoke. If my right hon. Friend the Minister achieves nothing else in the rest of his parliamentary career—I know that that will not be the case—he will go down in history as the person who did more than anyone else to give the people of this country the minimum wage. We are all grateful for that.

On targets and delivery, I think that the literacy and numeracy strategies are a perfect example of the case for a clear target. All hon. Members would agree on the need to improve literacy and numeracy, especially among those who are most disadvantaged by a lack of those skills when they leave school, and to provide a mechanism to deliver that improvement. I take this opportunity to place on record my congratulations to the teachers and head teachers in my constituency on their work in trying to achieve improvement.

I should like to refer to the role of special advisers, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for South

[Mr. Hilary Benn]

Cambridgeshire. I should perhaps declare an interest as a former special adviser. Special advisers are a much maligned group. Every time there is a change of Government, the papers are full of tales of warning about this new group of politically motivated people who will subvert democracy, undermine the civil service and so on. One would not think for a minute that special advisers as a species have been around Whitehall for more than a quarter of a century, which makes them sound very ancient. We know that the special adviser is a peculiar form of civil servant—a point that was made forcefully to me when I opened my letter of appointment as a special adviser. It said that I was obliged to abide by the civil service code of conduct, but with two exceptions. First, I was exempt from the requirement that civil servants should not engage in party political activity, which is a recognition of the peculiar and particular role of special advisers. Secondly, the letter said rather pointedly that I was also exempt from the requirement that normally all civil servants should be appointed on merit. I did not take that personally.

The letter was a good way for the civil service machine to tell special advisers that they are rather different, as indeed they are. It is a typically British compromise. When there is a change of Government in other countries, the whole top tier of the civil service disappears and is replaced by a new set of people. In our British way, we have found a mechanism that gives Ministers in all Governments the support that they need to achieve their objectives, while recognising that Ministers, special advisers and civil servants have different roles. Arguments about politicisation of the civil service do not, therefore, stand up to scrutiny, and provided that each of the players understands his or her different roles, advisers help Governments of all parties to achieve their objectives.

I want to make two brief points. First, I should like to reflect on the fact that government is about the relationship between Government and the governed. We stand on the edge of the new millennium, never mind of the period in office of the previous Conservative Government. Some big changes have occurred during the past millennium, such as the end of the absolute right of kings. Poor old Canute discovered that his writ did not run to the sea. The whole of the thousand years has been about people who thought that they had power—and in some cases did—coming to terms with the desire of people who live in the same country to have some say over that country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) mentioned the people's panel, which is a great innovation. One could probably have described the barons at Runnymede as the first manifestation of the people's panel to which King John found himself having to justify his power. My serious point is that government today faces the challenge of a much better educated and informed society. That is a healthy challenge to face, and it manifests itself in all sorts of forms.

I was speaking recently to a general practitioner. Patients may now see their doctor, having obtained on the internet printed information about their condition and about new forms of treatment, and, although not medical equals, engage in an informed discussion. All hon. Members will be familiar with the use of such information in the worlds in which we operate. It is healthy, and it creates a challenge for the way in which government works. People will argue with us as equals, and information is at the heart of the new relationship.

The first challenge that the White Paper addresses, taking account of that fundamental fact, is the form that government will take in the next century. Information is the key—the Government must have information to be able to target resources. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) commented on the comprehensive spending review process. I saw part of that process from the inside because of my former role. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase noted, the arguments are largely about what money is to be spent on and what will be received in return. That is wholly positive. In addition, the electorate want information to challenge us and our decisions. That is an essential part of the accountability of which other hon. Members spoke and a part of the openness in government to which we all aspire.

Occasionally—the food safety scare is a good example—the trick for the Government might be to say, "Here is the information and the advice from the chief scientific officer. We are no more scientifically qualified than you are; there might be a small risk. As adult members of our society, you can make a judgment using the information." The debate is interesting. People might come to the Government and ask whether 100 per cent. safety can be absolutely guaranteed, but we could not truthfully offer such a guarantee. Sharing information with people and allowing them to make decisions would be a step forward.

The second challenge—I say this with some feeling, having been elected for the constituency of Leeds, Central on an extremely low by-election turnout—is that there is another group in society. Some members of that group, whether through circumstances or by choice, are disengaged from the process of government. We knock on their doors, but they are not interested—they do not see the relevance to their lives of what we do and they are not convinced that the Government can make a difference. That is also an accountability issue.

We must recognise that modern government is an increasingly complex business. One reason why Governments have established organisations such as agencies, arm's-length bodies and task forces is that that is a way of managing the complex process. The weakness of our party political system is that it tends to encourage a five-yearly auction with the electorate. If we were being perfectly honest, we would accept that we tended to say, "Whatever your problems are, we will solve them if you vote for us." We know that that is not the reality and we probably do the process of efficient government a disservice.

The good example of risk has been mentioned. If one wishes civil servants to take more risks, one must be prepared to live with the consequences of failure. We know what the political process does under those circumstances—the Opposition see it as their job to say that the Government have failed and are not competent, and that a Minister should resign. That is not necessarily the best way to act. The question of policy advice is also relevant to the issue of freedom of information and we must reflect on that.

The process is not necessarily comfortable for us as politicians. Sharing power, information and accountability can be hard. I am not sufficiently naive to think that party politics will ever be written out of the script. At its best, it sharpens the nature of debate and the choices that we must make as elected politicians. However, it is worth recognising the limitations that it can create.

The most important feature of the White Paper is that it is open to the challenges that modernising government will create for us all in the next century; we may not yet have all the answers.

4.49 pm

Mr Neil Turner (Wigan): I was anxious to speak, even if only for some catharsis, because I seem to have spent the past two or three years doing nothing but talking about modernising government. That was about local government, however. While a councillor, I was the chairman of the best value panel introducing best value to Wigan. As a result of holding that post, I was a leading member of the team modernising the way in which the council acted, in advance of the Local Government Bill currently being considered in the other place. I was also a member of the Local Government Association's quality panel and so was involved in establishing the project to improve local government. I shall mention that later.

I was interested to get the White Paper off the internet. I should confess, in light of the Freedom of Information Bill, that that was done for me. I read it avidly, which may raise one or two eyebrows, but I do have a large number of anoraks at home. In contrast to previous Governments, I was struck by the commitment to public service and public servants. That is not an aside, but central to the whole process. Chapter 4, entitled "Quality public services", begins:

"This Government believes in the public service and public servants."

Chapter 6 states:

"Public service has for too long been neglected, undervalued and denigrated. It has suffered from a perception that the private sector was always best and the public sector was always inefficient. The Government rejects these prejudices."

That is right. I was a little surprised to hear the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) reject that. He is infected with the same collective amnesia as the rest of his party. I am not alone in thinking that their local government legislation was a wholesale attack on public service and public servants.

I was really sold on best value in Wigan. The chief executive told me that there were 75 cross-departmental organisations in Wigan council. Some were administrative groups led by public servants, but many should have had member involvement. That sold me on the need for best value and the involvement of members in scrutinising issues. I was keen on releasing the talent of public servants in local and central Government by turning from a blame culture to a "learn from our mistakes" culture. That meant admitting mistakes but not saying, "It's your fault." That would allow us to learn from mistakes and to ensure a better future.

I laid down and agreed the approach for Wigan. However, the last thing that I said was, "We've got it wrong. We have to recognise that there is no way that we can sit down here and get all this right at the first attempt." We did not know where we had gone wrong; that would only come out when the new process was put into practice. I quickly found out that a major reason why it was not working was that we overloaded people. We put the scrutiny role of best value above normal council activities.

One issue that is relevant to best value is that of inspectorates. There are a lot of inspectorates. They suck talent out of local government by employing people at high salaries. We need to remember the adage, "You do not fatten the pig by constantly measuring its size." It is important that the people who do the work are recognised as being important. That is where the best value lies.

I mentioned the improvement project. The Local Government Association established that project and the improvement and development agency to improve local authorities. The approach is to assist, criticise, examine weaknesses and strengths and to suggest ways forward. That approach is rightly replicated in the White Paper. However, we should be careful because some parts of government use the name and shame approach as the first option. Naming and shaming is demotivating and should be used as the last resort.

I was involved in two week-long projects, one in Mansfield in November and the other in Hull in March, which shows dedication bordering on, if not insanity, at least martyrdom. Those projects were very interesting and valuable. Once the improvement project has suggested improvements, it will review the situation six or nine months later to see how local authorities have followed up the points that it made. That is an important part of the process.

Last Friday, I was in my constituency helping colleagues at the council to consider how to deal with the modernising programme and the structures that need to be put in place following enactment of the Local Government Bill. One of the issues raised by hon. Members during consideration of that Bill was the question of secrecy, referred to in questions 35 and 36 of the Public Administration Committee's report. The issue centres on policy development. Some see that as a major issue and an innate part of the whole process, but I do not see it in that way. It is important that we recognise that it is a problem, but a problem that can be resolved. The important thing is to ensure that the whole council is involved in policy development, and that it is not left to the executive to decide policy in secret and hand it down as if it were written on tablets of stone. Policy must be decided by the whole council, and the cabinet or executive must execute that agreed policy. Then we can follow the scrutiny role, learning lessons on the way, in order to develop policy that accurately reflects the needs of the people in any particular local authority.

Another important aspect of our actions—this is relevant to the modernising government agenda at not only local but national level—was to recognise that it is important not only to think about internal structures but to develop links. That is recognised in chapter 3, which refers to responsive public services as

"genuine partnerships between those providing services and those using them."

It is essential that we develop those wider partnerships, as we are doing in Wigan. We are ensuring that voluntary organisations, such as Age Concern, for

[Mr Neil Turner]

example, are involved in services for the infirm. In developing sporting facilities and our sports field strategy, we are involving local football and rugby clubs. We involve representatives from business, such as the chambers of commerce and training and enterprise councils when considering how to retain businesses in the authority and how to bring in new businesses. Local agencies, such as the police, the health trust and health authority, and neighbouring authorities and central agencies, such as the Benefits Agency, need to be brought together to provide services. Those partnerships must not operate in isolation, so that there is one partnership with social services and another with young people, because they are interconnected. We need to create a matrix of relationships that can feed into the community plan, which is an integral part of the best value process, and into policy development for the community.

I welcome the moves to exchange public servants because it is important to build up personal relationships so that people can learn from others' experiences of working in health authorities and local and central Government in order to give them a better understanding of how all those government organisations that serve the people can relate to each other and feed back their experiences so that there is a wider understanding throughout. It can be difficult to break down barriers, but it is essential that we do so.

I hope that the modernisation process described in the White Paper is not party political. It will happen as e-commerce, e-mail and electronic communication come about. This modernising White Paper tackles those subjects by ensuring that the services that we provide are more relevant to the people who use them than they were in the past. It is important that we welcome the White Paper and make it work.

5 pm

Mr. Lansley: With the leave of the Chamber, I should like to capture a few of the issues before the Parliamentary Secretary responds to the debate. The White Paper and the debate raised some important issues. I shall reflect on two or three of them and provide some focus for our views on the subject before the Minister replies.

I am not sure who the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) will see on the annunciator now, but at least he explained the paucity of support behind me. I am honest enough to admit that my right hon. and hon. Friends would rather listen to his right hon. Friend and father, the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), than to me. That clearly explains why they were not in Westminster Hall.

The hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned the relationship between Government and government. He is right to say that things have changed dramatically in the last millennium. We are only 90 ft from the place where the country has been governed, in some form at least, for 900 years. Much has changed but, in some respects, much is the same.

Not long ago, the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) talked about the devolved character of the constitution. Anyone who has taken part in local government, like the hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner), will know that devolved administration has a longer and, in some respects, more honourable, history in this country than central Government.

I take issue with the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright): it is not a matter of better government as distinct from big or small government. I do not regard small government as an ideological pursuit. I confess that there were occasions in the past when we fell prey to it—I think especially of the Conservative Administration's relationship with local government. We wanted the kind of control in which central Government said, "We know what should be happening, we know what ought to be done, we don't want people to interfere with our prescription. We want them to do what we tell them to do or we won't let them do it at all." Down that path lies big government. My view, and that of my party, is that whatever the history, we still see small government as not an abandonment of the public by Government but as a place where the Government base their solutions not on central prescription but on local leadership, ownership and control. That means, not that local communities, especially if they are outside the public sector in the charity, voluntary or private sector, have less accountability, but that the performance measures, which determine what is being done, what should be done and what should be the priorities of local government or local community activity, are not set from the centre.

That brings me to the White Paper. It should not be about having such a powerful mechanism of central management control that it takes over the setting of priorities.

Dr. Tony Wright: The hon. Gentleman is genuinely confused. The issue of the size of government is different from the issue of the manner in which government should operate. In his speech the hon. Gentleman argued about the size of government. He is now describing issues that relate to how government operates.

Mr. Lansley: I may be confused; it happens often. The Minister of State will no doubt quote that back to me in future. I do not think that there is a direct relationship between the manner of government and the amount of government, but if central Government are not disarmed, if excessive control of regulation, tax, activities and legislation is not wrested from them, there will never be local ownership and control.

There are specific issues—as well as the broad, conceptual ones—which I am sure the Minister will also want to discuss. We have not referred to it today, but in the context of the White Paper there was a Government pledge to put the civil service code of conduct on a statutory footing. Does the Minister propose to take any action on that?

There is also the issue of technology. I was worried that the White Paper's big idea is not the character of government, which we have been discussing, but technology. That should not be its big idea. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) mentioned, for example, electronic data interchange. One can get hooked on particular technological solutions, but many

businesses in my constituency, which are at the cutting edge of some of these technologies, went into electronic data interchange, found it extraordinarily difficult to arrive at common standards with their customers and suppliers, so moved on to an internet-based system. Will the Minister confirm that the technological solutions that we are talking about will be flexible rather than rigid? We must not use a technology simply because it is available.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase asked a question about the Post Office. Without debating the origins and conclusions of the Horizon project, it is important to recognise that, in its absence, there is a question about access to services, particularly in rural areas such as the one that I represent. The Post Office has been an important source of that access, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said. I hope that Ministers will consider not only technological access but physical access. By providing the latter, post offices also give social support.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase also talked about freedom of information. He will probably accuse me of further confusion, but I was a civil servant for eight years under a Conservative Administration and I never felt myself to be especially undervalued.

Mr. White: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that many people, myself included, left the civil service in the 1980s—around the time that he was a member of it—because we felt that it was being politicised?

Mr. Lansley: I did not leave the civil service because I felt undervalued; I left because I wished to pursue a political career—not inside the civil service, which is a danger if it becomes too politicised. I recognised that I had to leave it to pursue a political career.

Much is said about civil service secondment. Rather than promoting too high a level of interchange between the civil service and the private sector, the civil service is extraordinarily good at recruiting, training and giving people responsibility at an early stage. People in the civil service should be encouraged to have a genuine interchange into the private sector—not secondment, with all the protections that go with it, but a genuine interchange with the possibility of coming back, perhaps five or 10 years later, with private sector experience. The combination of civil service and private sector experience can create just those people who might be most appropriate for the highest levels of administration.

Finally, I turn to the issue of accountability and modernisation. We must recognise that, if we choose to have activities in the public sector—leaving aside the debate about what should be in the public sector—they are there for a reason. In our view, they are in the public sector because of the accountability that needs to flow with that decision. I can give an example from my constituency. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food chose to transfer an asset out to the private sector, saying that the same legal rights attached to that asset in the private sector as in the public sector. But, of course, the choice of legal rights is not the end of the story; there is the question of accountability for what is done with that asset in future. That accountability has now been lost. That issue is at the heart, not just of the structure of the civil service, but of the accountability of government as a whole. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point, too.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): I am pleased to be speaking for the first time in this Room and to reply in a Government-sponsored debate. I hope that you will know when I am standing and sitting, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall do my best to ensure that you do.

I spent much of my adult life in a horseshoe-shaped chamber and it does not necessarily lead to consensus. In Manchester city council I participated in debates that were at least as vicious as the most vicious debates in the House—

Mr. Ian McCartney: And that was just in the Labour group.

Mr. Stringer: Yes. I hope that we have a different experience in this Room, but horseshoes and consensus do not necessarily go together.

I shall start by responding to my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), who made a thoughtful speech and showed himself to be a thoroughly modern hon. Member. He encapsulated the White Paper when he referred to putting the public service back together and making it accountable, which was an accurate interpretation.

My experience as a member of the public and a councillor 30 years ago was that local government and central Government services were not accountable. An elected councillor could not easily change housing policy. The examples that were given time and again during the late 1970s concerned simple things. It was not possible to introduce a policy allowing people to paint their own front door in a colour that they wanted.

The same was true of the national health service. In theory, the Secretary of State for Health was responsible for everything from the butcher to, in Aneurin Bevan's words, emptying the chamber pots. If people had difficulties with their local hospital or major hospitals, it was very difficult for them to get a response.

I examined the White Paper through the eyes of my constituents. Approximately £150 million of local government money is spent in my constituency and a similar amount is spent there by central Government. I listen to my constituents' problems concerning information, vandalism and a range of other matters, but approximately £300 million of public expenditure is locked up. A new phrase, which has not been mentioned during our debate but is common among officials and officers of the Local Government Association, is that it is locked up in silence. It may not be with local government or central Government, but it is locked up in voluntary sector bodies, local government bodies, central Government bodies and so on.

If there is a problem with vandalism, the cause and effect may involve environmental health officials, housing officials, police, truancy officers, educational welfare officers and a whole range of people. Dealing with a simple, regular problem may be difficult because of the way in which services are organised now. The

[Mr. Stringer]

same is true of people in the benefits system, who often require information about benefits and how they relate to other factors in their lives. They may go from one building to another trying to find that information. That is one of the five key messages in the White Paper. The others are that we need long-term policy rather than short-term responses to policy; that we want responsive, high-quality services; that we want information technology to be used to get such information; and, most importantly, that we must publicise the fact that we want a debate about the best way in which to deliver services and the fact that we value the services that the people who work in the public sector provide.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) said that, for most of the previous 18 years, people who worked in public services felt that they were second-rate citizens. They were regularly denigrated and told that they were inefficient. Compulsory competitive tendering did much to destabilise the situation, and although it often lowered costs, it did not necessarily produce greater efficiency. The Government should not mirror the policies of the Conservative Government, who said, "Private good, public bad." We should reverse that approach, specify what is appropriate and value those who are in the public sector.

The least serious point that was made by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell)—it detracted from his otherwise serious speech—was about the policy of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister towards teachers. To say that one values the public sector and those who work in it does not mean that one believes that there should be no change or that one will not, from time to time, enter into dialogue with those in the public sector. If the hon. Gentleman reads my right hon. Friend's speech, he will realise that the Prime Minister said that 90-odd per cent. of teachers—my right hon. Friend did not give an exact figure—were doing an extraordinarily good job.

The hon. Gentleman's next point involved arguing that everyone should be paid much more. That is standard Liberal Democrat policy and I do not blame him for that approach. I presume that all the extra money that will go to nurses and teachers—and to many others—will come from his party's proposed 1p on income tax. He also said that he wanted the basic structure of pay in those services to remain the same. However, it is obvious to everyone who thinks seriously about the matter that if people are doing a good job they should have incentives—financial or otherwise—and receive rewards.

Mr. Stunell: Does not the Minister recognise that there is a serious problem with morale and recruitment in the medical and the teaching professions? A significant part of the problem involves their feeling that the Government do not value their contribution to the public sector.

Mr. Stringer: The hon. Gentleman is discussing what is left over from 18 years of Conservative Government. He makes precisely my point—that there has been poor morale in the public sector. However, the initiatives that have been taken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) have resulted in record numbers of nurses returning to the health service. We could discuss other parts of the public sector, where there have been similar experiences. People recognise that this Government are different from the previous Government.

I shall probably disappoint my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase by referring him to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for a detailed discussion of the Freedom of Information Bill. The discussion that he wants to have is beyond the scope of this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) made several interesting, relevant and thoughtful points. His comments on how long pilot schemes should run and how they should be integrated into local government have been made regularly by the Local Government Association, which has discussed pilot schemes and action zones. The Government's position is that some solutions are better determined locally, and others nationally. Action zones and pilot schemes are partly intended to function as experiments and to establish what will work. There have been so many interesting and relevant points raised that it will be impossible to respond to them all. However, I will ensure that my hon. Friend receives a letter about any that I do not pick up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) spoke eloquently about matters in his constituency and how they related to democracy and the delivery of service. He pinpointed the alienation and social exclusion experienced by those known to many of us who represent inner-city areas. The social exclusion unit has been set up precisely to help us understand those problems.

We cannot afford, as a society, to allow people to be socially excluded. It is not simply a matter of the cost to society. It is a disgrace in a modern society when so many people decide that they have no interest in voting or in participating at any level—be it at the jobs level or any other. That often leads to drug taking, through cause and effect. We are studying all those issues, so that we can obtain a joined-up policy response to them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) was basically supportive of the Government's policy and of the White Paper, but raised an issue that had not been mentioned by other hon. Members. It is another core issue in the White Paper—that of consultation. There cannot be a more over-used word than "consultation". Everyone is in favour of it, but they find it difficult to define. Some people, when asked about consultation, mean the transfer of power to the consultees. Others see it as a process of handing over information to people.

It is important that consultation should take place, and that the consulters and the consultees should understand what the exchange is about before they go any further. That is the case whether the exchange is about the transfer of power—which is rare—or about setting the limits of a policy within which to work, eliciting another's views on the matter, and stating how those views will be taken into account. That is the core of good consultation, and I agree with my hon. Friend on that point.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) raised many points, and one would need about an hour and half in which to respond to them. I shall try to go through them as quickly as I can.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has eight minutes.

Mr. Stringer: I understand that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is why I shall reply in writing to the hon. Gentleman on any points that I miss.

It was a bit rich of the hon. Gentleman to talk about not having joined-up government, when the Conservative party must be the most non-joined-up party of this century. It is so non-joined-up that it has decided to exclude the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) from the London mayoral contest although she supports her party's policy on section 28, yet support an ex-Member of Parliament in the contest who does not agree with its policy. It is extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman can talk about joined-up government, given that that is his party's record.

The hon. Gentleman asked in his winding-up speech about the civil service code. The legislation to put that code into law is not necessary to implement the White Paper. It is still Government policy to put the code into law, but that will have to wait for its space in the legislative timetable.

The hon. Gentleman, like the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, made a serious point about people being excluded by new technology, and the fact that some of the big projects simply have not worked. I probably know more about national air traffic control systems than I do about the projects that were mentioned. There are so many projects that we probably missed one or two. Because we do not want people to be excluded from technology, £500 million has been invested in learning centres. Libraries will stock 100,000 computers that can be taken out on loan, just as one borrows a book. That is part of modernising government and of not excluding people from services and a modern society.

On the issue of big projects and people's exclusion from new technology, it is true that some people will always be excluded. For example, about 98 per cent.—not 100 per cent.—of people in this country own a telephone. The important point is to include as many people as one can. The alternative is to do nothing and stay as we are, but a society that uses the internet cannot afford to do that. We must ensure that people have access to computers and new technology.

Major IT projects such as the National Air Traffic Services system—if it works—will greatly increase air capacity. A passport system that works would provide quicker access to passports. One could list many such benefits. The Cabinet Office is looking at why those projects have failed in the past, so that they do not fail in future. We cannot turn our faces to history and say, "Well, the old system worked, but the most recent one did not, so we shall go back to the old one." That would not deliver the service that we want.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire talked about regulation, but he did not say why the number of regulatory orders that were passed after the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) had cut and burned as much red tape as he could was virtually the same as before he started, and virtually the same as was passed by this Government. Regulation is important. Most people want to be protected by it, but they do not want unnecessary regulation. The important concept is proportionate regulation. The Government are determined not to introduce regulation that is disproportionate. Where existing regulation is not proportionate, we shall get rid of it. It is not good policy to say "Forget what we did". During the previous Conservative Administration, no one could accuse the right hon. Member for Henley of being less than ideologically determined to get rid of as much red tape as he could.

I shall draw my remarks to a conclusion. It was extraordinary to hear a Conservative spokesman say that conservatives now want as much decentralisation as possible. We are now to believe that they are the champions of local democracy. Many people in this Chamber served on local councils at a time when it was the previous Government's policy increasingly to privatise and to centralise control. By 1997, this country had become the most centralised in western Europe. It is part of this Government's policy to modernise the country that the previous Government left in such a mess.

The "Modernising government" White Paper is central to improving the quality of people's lives. I thank hon. Members for participating in this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Five o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 29 November 1999

DEFENCE

Procurement

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list (i) the original in-service date, (ii) the current in-service date, (iii) the estimated and actual costs, (iv) the years of expected peak expenditure and (v) the prime contractor for all the endorsed staff requirements. [98583]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The information requested is not held centrally, and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Indonesia

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the use of equipment supplied to Indonesia's armed forces by United Kingdom suppliers; and if he will make a statement. [99297]

Mr. Kilfoyle: We are in regular contact with our Embassy in Jakarta about the use of such equipment. We have made it clear to Indonesia that UK-supplied defence equipment should not be used in East Timor or against civilians in violation of human rights standards.

Target Setting

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many targets have been agreed between his Department and (i) local authorities and (ii) other bodies apart from his own agencies and non-departmental bodies since May 1997. [99478]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* With the exception of the Public Service Agreement with HM Treasury my Department has no targets agreed with other bodies at the Departmental level. However the Public Service Agreement is consistent with the wider goals of the Government. At a lower level some elements of the Department and the Armed Forces will share goals with outside bodies. It would not be possible to provide a comprehensive list of such shared goals without disproportionate cost.

Falkland Islands

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the armed forces are currently committed to the defence of the Falkland Islands. [100018]

Mr. Spellar: There are currently approximately 1,650 Service personnel in the Falkland Islands.

Old Ranges, Shoeburyness

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date the tender documents for the site at the Old Ranges, Shoeburyness, have to be lodged with Donaldsons of 70 Jermyn Street, London SW1; and when the tender documents will be available to possible bidders. [100055]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The sales brochure specified that the extra site would be sold by means of Best Offer bids, and that proposals should be received by 12 noon on Friday 10 December 1999, at the agents, Donaldsons, 70 Jermyn street, London. Donaldsons wrote to all prospective purchasers on 24 November 1999, explaining the basis upon which offers should be made. There is no requirement for formal tender documentation given that the site is not being sold by Formal Tender.

IT Projects

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information on *(a)* costs and *(b)* time scales of IT projects currently being undertaken by his Department is held centrally; if he will list the (i) start date, (ii) planned completion date, (iii) expected completion date, (iv) planned cost and (v) current estimated cost of these projects where available; and if he will make a statement. [99666]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The information requested is not readily available; however, I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Army (Terms of Service)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the impact of the Army Terms of Service (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 1999 on the ability of young people in the armed forces to leave after enlistment; and what is the minimum period of service for which such young persons will have to enlist. [100193]

Mr. Spellar: All recruits to non-commissioned service in the Army enter on an Open Engagement of 22 years reckonable service from age 18 or the date of joining, whichever is the later. The Army Terms of Service (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 1999, which came into effect on 1 November 1999, increased the minimum commitment period for newly recruited soldiers from three to four years. Those enlisted after this date will, therefore, serve for an additional year before they have the right to discharge to the reserve.

The Army Terms of Service (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 1999 have no effect on the statutory right to discharge provisions. A recruit under the age of 18 can leave the Army free as of right within the first six months of service (having served at least 28 days and having given 14 days notice); for those aged over 18, the statutory right to discharge ends three months after joining for duty.

New recruits who do not exercise this right are committed to serve for four years from their 18th birthday or 4.25 years after attestation, whichever is the later. Provision does, however, exist for personnel of any age to be discharged from the service at any time for a number of reasons, including compassionate.

War Widows

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence by what date war widows will be able to keep their armed forces pension on remarriage. [99094]

Mr. Spellar: The payment of widows' pensions is being examined as part of the review of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme which is currently under way. We hope it will be concluded by next summer. It is not possible at this stage to comment on the outcome.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions Ministers or his officials have held with the Department of Social Security in respect of war pensions for widows; and if he will make a statement. [100310]

Mr. Spellar: MOD and DSS officials have worked closely on the joint MOD-DSS review of compensation for members of the armed forces who suffer illness, injury, and death for reasons attributable to service. The MOD and DSS routinely discuss war pensions issues, including arrangements for war widows. There are also day-to-day contacts between DSS War Pensions Agency and the MOD Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency about the handling of individual cases.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what would be the cost of war widows retaining for life attributable pensions awarded under his Department's armed forces pension scheme. [100313]

Mr. Spellar: We estimate that the cost of war widows retaining for life their attributable pensions would be between £2 million and £3 million per annum.

Marital Status (Service Personnel)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of *(a)* the Army, *(b)* the Royal Air Force and *(c)* the Royal Navy have changed from Maristat One in each year between and including 1989 and the current financial year; into which marital category they have changed; what proportion of each service this represents for each year; and if he will make a statement. [99928]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Air Crashes

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if, for the RAF, the Royal Navy and the Army, he will list *(a)* the number of aircraft crashed in each of the past five years to November 1999, *(b)* their value, *(c)* the age and type of each aircraft, *(d)* the fate of the pilots and *(e)* the attributed cause of each accident. [100311]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The information requested is not readily available; however I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

National Employers Liaison Committee

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the budget for the National Employers Liaison Committee for the reserves of the armed forces and *(b)* the Territorial Army Recruiting Budget for each year from 1994. [99930]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Pay Scales

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will set out the current pay scales for *(a)* non-regular permanent staff staff sergeants and *(b)* MOD civil service executive officers. [99932]

Mr. Spellar: The current pay scale for a non-regular permanent staff (NRPS) staff sergeant, effective from 1 April 1999, is £20,613 per annum on appointment, rising to £20,723 after nine years.

With effect from 1 August 1999, the maximum point on the executive officer pay scale was increased from £18,264 to £22,727. The minimum was also increased, from £11,914 to £12,523.

Redundancy Payments

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the value of redundancy payments made to non-regular permanent staff replaced by Executive Officers as Territorial Army financial systems administrators; and how many NRPS FSAs over 50 years of age have been pensioned off. [99934]

Mr. Spellar: To date there have been no redundancy payments made to non-regular permanent staff (NRPS) financial systems administrator (FSA) personnel, including those over age 50, who are being replaced by civilian Executive Officers (EOs). It is not currently possible to provide the value of redundancy payments which will be made because such payments will be determined individually and will be calculated on the basis of length of NRPS service and rate of pay on discharge.

The number of NRPS FSAs over the age of 50 is not held centrally, but is being collated, and I will write to the hon. Member with this detail and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Broadsword

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost of repairing and refitting the Joint Services Adventure Sail Training vessel Broadsword in the past year; and what would be the cost of purchasing an equivalent new boat. [99931]

Mr. Spellar: The Joint Services Adventure Sail Training vessel Broadsword completed an extensive package of work in May 1998 to extend her life for a further 15 years. The total cost of this work was £256,000. Since then, the only costs incurred on Broadsword have been for repair work associated with her participation in the Transglobe Inter-Savings global yacht race, which has not yet completed. It is estimated that the repair work undertaken to-date will cost about £14,000. No refit work is planned for 1999–2000. The cost of purchasing an equivalent new boat is estimated to be about £700,000.

Territorial Army

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) for what reason Territorial Army financial systems administrators have each received substitution pay of £10 per day; and what has been the total cost to his budget; [99929]

(2) how many Territorial Army financial systems administrator posts are being civilianised; what is *(a)* the average and *(b)* the maximum number of training weeks required to train executive officers as FSAs; what is the cost of that training; what is the cost of (i) subsistence and (ii) travelling expenses per person per day for that training at Worthy Down; and whether overtime will be payable to civilianised FSAs. [99933]

Mr. Spellar: The post of Financial Systems Administrator (FSA) was civilianised with effect from 1 July 1999, and this will affect some 78 non-regular permanent staff (NRPS). The executive officer (EO) grade civil servants who will fulfil this function in future will each undergo a maximum of 18 weeks training at the School of Employment (SET) Training at Worthy Down before taking over the job fully. One additional member of staff has been temporarily employed to assist in running courses at SET at a cost of some £35,000 to minimise the impact of this surge in requirement on existing courses.

The travel and subsistence costs for EOs attending these courses depend on an individual's circumstances. Where EOs stay in the Officers' Mess at Worthy Down, they will receive daily subsistence of £5 in addition to the cost of accommodation. If they stay in a hotel, the rate is up to a maximum of £25 in addition to the cost of accommodation. It is not possible to provide a meaningful figure for travelling expenses because each individual's circumstances are unique. Executive officer FSAs will be entitled to claim overtime.

Until such time as the executive officers take over these responsibilities, the NRPS staff sergeants who are currently filling the posts are entitled to substitution pay which equates to £10 a day. In order to provide an overall cost, it would be necessary to refer to individual records and this has not been possible in the time available.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what motor mileage allowance rates his Department offers to *(a)* ministers and *(b)* civil servants using their own vehicles for official business; and what has been the cost of each in each of the last five years. [98699]

Mr. Straw: Home Office Ministers, when travelling on official business, may use a private car instead of an official car, and claim mileage allowances in the same circumstances and on the same terms as Home Office civil servants. However, all five Ministers use the Government Car Service. The vehicles available to me, while purchased by my Department, are operated by the Metropolitan Police.

The Motor Mileage Allowance Rates offered to Ministers and civil servants using their own vehicles for official business are as follows:

Home Office (excluding Prison Service)

Motor Vehicle Rates

Public Transport Rate
23.8p per mile

Standard Rate Mileage

Engine capacity up to 1500cc
35.7p for first 5,000 miles
19p for over 5,000 miles

Engine capacity 1501–2000cc
43p for first 5,000 miles
23p for over 5,000 miles

Engine capacity over 2000cc
46p for first 5,000 miles
31p for over 5,000 miles

Motor Cycle Rates

Public Transport Rate

Engine capacity up to 125cc
12.9p per mile

Engine capacity over 125cc
23.8p per mile

Standard Rate Mileage

Engine capacity up to 125cc
16.2p for first 4,000 miles
6.2p for over 4,000 miles

Engine capacity over 125cc
26p for first 4,000 miles
9p for over 4,000 miles

Prison Service

Motor Vehicle Rates

Public Transport Rate
24.9p per mile

Standard Rate Mileage

Engine capacity up to 1000cc
28p for first 4,000 miles
17p for over 4,000 miles

Engine capacity 1001–1500cc
35p for first 4,000 miles
20p for over 4,000 miles

Engine capacity 1501–2000cc
45p for first 4,000 miles
25p for over 4,000 miles

Engine capacity over 2000cc
63p for first 4,000 miles
36p for over 4,000 miles

Motor Cycle Rates

Public Transport Rate

Engine capacity up to 125cc
13.4p per mile

Engine capacity over 125cc
24.9 per mile

Standard Rate Mileage

Engine capacity up to 125cc
17.5p for first 4,000 miles
6.5p for over 4,000 miles

Engine capacity over 125cc
27.2p for first 4,000 miles
9.7p for over 4,000 miles

Expenditure

The cost of motor mileage allowances for Home Office civil servants in each of the last three years has been as follows:

Year	*£*
1996–97	1,116,202
1997–98	1,039,917
1998–99	930,237

Unfortunately, data are not available for the earlier two years: 1994–95 and 1995–96. Also these figures exclude expenditure in the United Kingdom Passport Agency and the Prison Service because these data could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Passport Agency

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from organisations representing tourism and the travel industry *(a)* supporting and *(b)* opposing an increase in fees charged by the Passport Agency for issuing passports. [99401]

Mrs. Roche: Representations expressing concern about increases in passport fees have been received from The Association of British Travel Agents Ltd., The Council of Travel and Tourism, the Passenger Shipping Association and the Federation of Tour Operators.

The Agency has taken careful account of their representations in its review of passport fees.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date he plans to publish the Passport Agency's business plan 1999–2000 and its corporate plan 1999 to 2002. [100210]

Mr. Straw: The Passport Agency's Corporate and Business Plans 1999–2002 will be published shortly.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date his advisory board considered the Passport Agency's business plan 1999 to 2000 and its corporate plan 1999 to 2002; and if his advisory board has now approved those plans. [100208]

Mr. Straw: The Passport Agency's revised Corporate and Business Plans were considered by the Advisory Board on 27 September. The plans, which were held back pending the publication of the National Audit Office report, have now been approved. They will be issued shortly, together with a recovery plan which sets out the action the Agency is taking to prevent a recurrence of this year's problems.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date the Board of the United Kingdom Passport Agency considered its business plan 1999–2000 and its corporate plan 1999 to 2002; and if the plans have been approved. [100209]

Mr. Straw: The Passport Agency's revised Corporate and Business Plans were considered by the Agency's Management Board on 20 September. The plans, which were held back pending publication of the National Audit Office Report, have now been approved. They will be published shortly, together with a recovery plan which sets out the action the Agency is taking to prevent a recurrence of this year's problems.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in his review of the future level of passport fees. [100214]

Mr. Straw: We are looking at various options for a possible increase in passport fees and an announcement of the outcome will be made shortly.

Airport Vetting

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when it became the practice for immigration officers to vet passengers as to the status of their visas and passports prior to leaving aeroplanes arriving in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [99848]

Mrs. Roche: While there are powers in Schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971 which allow an Immigration officer to board and search an aircraft and to require the production of a passenger's documents, Immigration officers do not routinely examine passengers' travel documents prior to their leaving an aircraft. However, Immigration officers regularly attend arriving flights and check travel documents shortly after disembarkation in order to identify inadequately documented passengers. This practice has grown since the late 1980s in order to deal with the increasing number of passengers who destroy or otherwise dispose of their travel documents and tickets after departure for the United Kingdom. The procedures have been developed to establish the proof of carriage so that charges under the carriers' liability legislation can be effectively pursued and also to minimise the difficulties and costs in removing persons where the identity of the carrier and the port of embarkation cannot be established.

Commission for Racial Equality

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the total amount of the settlements made with the five employees of the Commission for Racial Equality with regard to their claims of racial discrimination against the Commission. [100211]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Details of personal settlements are confidential between the parties involved.

Post Office

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the principal activities of his Department and its agencies which provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices and *(b)* other post offices; if he will assess whether the level of business generated in each case is likely to increase or decrease over the next five years; and which new areas of business for post offices are likely to be developed by his Department and its agencies over the same period. [99556]

Mrs. Roche: The United Kingdom Passport Agency has a partnership arrangement with Post Office Counters Limited which was established in January 1996. Under this arrangement, passport applicants can lodge their application at any main Post Office.

The Agency is currently re-tendering its partnership arrangements, however both the Agency and Post Office Counters Ltd. have indicated a commitment to working together in the future.

Identity Cards

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment he has made of the advantages of the introduction of national identity cards which include identification for entitlement to social security payments. [99093]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We are considering all the relevant issues involved in identity cards including their possible contribution to tackling welfare fraud, increasing individual convenience and simplifying Government. We have not yet reached any final conclusions.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Clay Pigeon Shooting

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress is being made towards a code of practice for clay pigeon shooting. [98827]

Kate Hoey: The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, Clay Pigeon Shooting Association and British Shooting Sports Council jointly issued, for consultation, draft guidance on the management and control of noise for clay pigeon shooting in November 1997. The consultation period was completed in March 1998 and the guidance is still under preparation. I understand the authors are awaiting further input from various bodies, and will publish the guidance at the earliest opportunity.

TV Licence Fees

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people will benefit from the free licence fee for those persons aged over 75 years, announced by him; and if he will make a statement. [98535]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 22 November 1999]:* Over 3 million households will benefit from the provision of television licences free of charge to people aged 75 or over, announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his pre-Budget statement.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to review TV licence concessions available for blind people and those in residential and sheltered accommodation below the age of 75 years. [99173]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 22 November 1999]:* The Government accept that the introduction of free television licences for people aged 75 or over will not remove the need to consider the shortcomings of the existing concessionary arrangements. We shall consider the recommendations of the BBC funding review panel in the light of the responses to the public consultation which has just concluded. We intend to announce our conclusions in January.

Channel 5

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement in respect of his policy towards the percentage of home-produced material broadcast on Channel 5. [99133]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* Under the terms of its licence from the Independent Television Commission, Channel 5 must comply with the terms of the European Commission's Directive 97/36/EC (which amended Directive 89/552/EC). Under the Directive, the majority of programmes broadcast by Channel 5 must be of European origin. Channel 5 met that licence condition in 1997 and 1998. For these years, the proportions of European-originated programming transmitted by Channel 5 (other than news, sports coverage, games, advertising and teletext services which are exempted from the Directive) were 60 per cent. and 52 per cent. respectively. A high proportion of Channel 5's European-originated programming is produced in the UK.

BBC Funding

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he plans to respond to the report by the Independent Review Panel on the future funding of the BBC. [100045]

Janet Anderson: The period of public consultation on the panel's recommendations ended on 1 November. We are considering all the panel's recommendations in the light of responses received and hope to announce our final decisions in January.

Culture/Audiovisual Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the outcome of the Culture/Audiovisual Council held in Brussels on 23 November; and if he will make a statement. [99847]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I represented the United Kingdom at the Culture/Audiovisual Council held in Brussels on 23 November. The Presidency reported on the ongoing conciliation process for the Culture 2000 programme. The Council agreed a Resolution on the promotion of the free

movement of persons working in the cultural sector. The Commission will carry out a study on the obstacles to free movement, and the results will be presented at the beginning of the French Presidency. The Council agreed conclusions on the cultural industries and employment in Europe. There was some discussion of the successor programme to MEDIA II and we now await the Commission's proposals for this, which are expected shortly. The Council adopted conclusions on the protection of minors in the context of development in digital audiovisual services. These encourage the parties concerned, (manufacturers, broadcasters and operators), to co-operate in considering ways of evaluating and rating audiovisual content in order to assist parents in the protection of minors. Several cultural initiatives carried out by member states in support of reconciliation in Kosovo were also announced.

National Lottery Commission

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the National Lottery Commission. [100809]

Mr. Chris Smith: I regret to report that Robin Squire has resigned his membership of the National Lottery Commission for business and other personal reasons. I will appoint a successor in due course.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Teddy Bear Ties

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee on what authority, and for what reason, the decision was taken to sell teddy bear ties in the souvenir shop. [100435]

Mr. Dennis Turner: This is a matter for the Director of Catering Services. I have asked her to reply to my right hon. Friend.

Divisions

Mr. Miller: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what estimate he has made of the cost to the House of *(a)* the conducting of each division of the House (i) before and (ii) after 10 pm and *(b)* each hour of the House's sitting after 10 pm, in each case including all costs relating to staff and the Parliamentary Estate. [100746]

Mr. Kirkwood: The cost to the House of conducting divisions is met from the day-to-day budgets of House departments. The figures are not separately identified.

For divisions after 10 pm, no additional staff or services are required when the House divides, so no separately identifiable costs are incurred for such divisions. Some additional costs are incurred when House staff have to stay after 11 pm. e.g. for providing late night transport for staff of the House and others (e.g. security staff).

The fixed costs of running the estate are incurred regardless of what time the House rises.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Russia

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with the Russian Government concerning help with, and advice on, the welfare and protection of street children. [99523]

Clare Short: I have had no direct discussion with the Russian government on street children.

My Department is developing a project, expected to start early next year, which will directly benefit homeless and vulnerable children in Ekaterinburg and Sverdlovsk oblast. Throughout the design process, DFID officials have maintained close contact with the Russian regional and municipal authorities, who support the proposed work.

Hurricane Lenny

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what reports she has received of the effects of Hurricane Lenny in the Bahamas. [99205]

Clare Short: The effects of Hurricane Lenny in the Bahamas were limited to heavy rainfall. There have been no reports of significant damage.

PRIME MINISTER

National Insurance

Mr. Field: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the reforms that have been made to national insurance as mentioned in the Gracious Speech. [99412]

The Prime Minister: Following recommendations in the Taylor Report on "The Modernisation of Britain's Tax and Benefits System", the Government have introduced the most far-reaching restructuring of the National Insurance System for 20 years. Measures announced in the last two Budgets have been designed to improve work incentives, encourage job creation and build a fairer and simpler National Insurance System.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the official visits to China since 1 May 1997, specifying for each occasion (i) the *(a)* Ministers, *(b)* special advisers and *(c)* numbers of officials who attended, (ii) the matters discussed and conclusions reached and (iii) the cost of the visit. [99130]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* Under the terms of the "Ministerial Code", any member of the Cabinet who wishes to be absent from the United Kingdom for any reason, except for visits to European countries on official business, or visits to member countries for NATO business requires my written approval. Other Ministers who propose to be absent from the country must seek the approval of the Ministerial Head of the Department concerned. A list of visits overseas by Cabinet Ministers costing £500 or more during the period May 1997 to March 1999 was placed in the Library of the House on 17 June 1999. Since then two Cabinet Ministers, the Secretary of State for Trade and

Industry and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport have visited China at an estimated cost of £34,000. This includes the cost of travel and accommodation for a Private Secretary accompanying each Minister and in the case of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, a Special Adviser. Both visits were made in accordance with the rules set out in the "Ministerial Code".

Detailed information on visits overseas by Junior Ministers is not collected centrally, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Special Advisers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what has been the total salary bill, including on-costs, of special advisers employed at 10 Downing street for each year since 1 May 1997. [99137]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) on 21 January 1998, *Official Report,* columns 567W-68W and to the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) on 15 June 1998, *Official Report,* columns 5W-6W and that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office gave to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on 11 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 828W.

Ministers (Private Health Insurance)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to provide guidance to Government ministers regarding the purchase of private health insurance policies. [99309]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* No. The purchase of insurance policies by individual Ministers in a private capacity is a personal matter.

State Visits

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the State Visits to the United Kingdom that have been made since May 1997 and the dates of each visit. [98655]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* The following State Visits to the United Kingdom have been made since 1 May 1997:

Visitor	*Date*
President of Brazil	2–5 December 1997
Emperor of Japan	26–29 May 1998
President of Germany	1–4 December 1998
President of Hungary	22–25 June 1999
President of the People's Republic of China	19–22 October 1999

Tibet

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish in the *Official Report* the reply he gave to the letter from Amnesty International, the Free Tibet Campaign and Mr. Wei Jingsheng of 21 October, requesting an official statement from Her Majesty's Government on human rights and Tibet. [99435]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* My Office's reply to the letter of 21 October from Amnesty International and others said that I discussed human rights with the Chinese President during our meeting and lunch on 21 October. It added that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office would brief Amnesty International and other non-governmental organisations concerned on the human rights aspect of the State Visit and the next steps in our human rights dialogue with the Chinese. The briefing took place on 9 November.

Lord Chancellor

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister what consultation the Lord Chancellor had with him about the newspaper reports that officials in the House of Lords were asked by him to make untrue statements; and what advice he gave to the Lord Chancellor. [100186]

The Prime Minister: None.

Social Exclusion Unit

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister what is the budget of the Social Exclusion Unit for the current financial year and for each future year for which a budget has been set for it. [99588]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 November 1999]:* The Social Exclusion Unit's running costs budget for 1999–2000 is £1,846,334. The Unit's budget for 2000–01 and subsequent financial years has not been agreed and will depend partly on the outcome of the current review of the Unit's future which will be announced before the end of this year.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the title of each report published to date by the Social Exclusion Unit, stating the cost implications of the recommendations made in each report. [99644]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 November 1999]:* To date the Social Exclusion Unit has published the following reports:

"School Exclusion and Truancy" (published May 1998);

"Rough Sleeping" (published July 1998);

"Neighbourhood Renewal" (published September 1998);

"Teenage Pregnancy" (published June 1999);

"Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16–18 Year Olds Not in Education, Employment or Training" (published July 1999).

Each report contains information on the cost implications of its recommendations

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the title, purpose and work programme of all policy action teams led *(a)* by the Social Exclusion Unit and *(b)* by departments with Social Exclusion Unit involvement, indicating in each case (i) the date when they were set up and (ii) the date when their work is due for completion. [99587]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 November 1999]:* The remit and timetable for each of the 18 Policy Action Teams is set out in the Social Exclusion Unit's report "Bringing Britain Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal" [CM 4045]. Copies are available

in the Libraries of the House. All 18 Teams started work in autumn 1998. The following six Teams have published reports:

Business;

Housing Management;

Unpopular Housing;

Community Self-Help;

Arts and Sport;

Financial Services.

The others will follow over the next few months.

Copies of all the published reports are available in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister how many staff were employed in the Social Exclusion Unit in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; and what plans he has for staffing levels in 2000 to 2002. [99643]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 November 1999]:* By the end of 1997 The Social Exclusion Unit had 12 members of staff. On 30 June 1998 the Unit had 21 members of staff and on 30 June 1999 the Unit had 35 members of staff. The Unit's staffing for 2000–01 and subsequent financial years has not been agreed and will depend partly on the conclusions of the current review of the Unit's future which will be announced before the end of this year.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister what the current work programme is of the Social Exclusion unit, including *(a)* the titles of all reports in preparation, *(b)* their expected publication dates and *(c)* any further subjects due to be examined by the unit during the period 2000 to 2002. [99645]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 November 1999]:* The current work programme of the Social Exclusion Unit includes support to the Policy Action Teams which the Unit itself leads and liaison with those led by other Departments, the preparation of a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and oversight of the implementation of previous reports.

The Unit's future work programme will reflect the conclusions of the current review of the Unit's future which will be announced before the end of the year.

Balkans

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what action the Government are taking to minimise hypothermia in the Balkans during the winter. [100090]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The impact of the Balkan winter is likely to be the harshest in Kosovo, where 100,000 houses were severely damaged or destroyed during the conflict. The Department for International Development (DFID) aims to complement shelter initiatives being carried out by other donors by rehabilitating utilities, especially power and water supplies, before the weather becomes too severe.

The electrical distribution system (100KV) sustained considerable war damage and is the focus of DFID's attention. Other donors are working on the 220KV and 440KV transmission systems. Our aim is to help the local authorities with the supply of equipment and technical advice on the electrical distribution system throughout Kosovo. A British management team, jointly funded by the EU Task Force and British Trade International (BTI), is currently working with the EU Task Force, UNMIK and the Kosovo Electric Company, to manage the overall power situation in Kosovo. Specific funding from DFID and BTI is ensuring the continued supply of coal to the Kosovo power stations.

Additionally, DFID has committed £3 million to carry out emergency works to Pristina airport to keep it operational throughout the winter. The airport is a crucial alternative supply route to the congested Blace border crossing.

In Serbia heating assistance is being targeted on vulnerable groups by the international agencies such as UNHCR and the European Commission's Humanitarian Office (ECHO). ECHO's assistance to Serbia and Montenegro since May 1999 amounts to 26.6 million euros, of which the UK has contributed approximately 15 per cent.

Life Peerages

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister if he will seek to change the law to provide a way for a life peerage to be disclaimed; and if he will make a statement. [100126]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* In the unlikely event that a life peer wished to disclaim a life peerage he or she could seek to introduce a Private Bill to enable that to happen.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Lift Installations

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the average waiting time between the occupational therapist's recommendation of a through-floor lift and the installation of the lift in *(a)* the South and East and *(b)* the North and West Trust areas in the last 12 months. [98474]

Mr. George Howarth: The average waiting time in South and East Belfast Trust area in public sector housing is three months for terminally ill clients and over one year for others. For private sector housing this is 3–5 months if the building work is undertaken by the client and over one year where an application is made for a Disabled Facilities Grant. In North and West Belfast Trust area the average waiting time is 4–5 months.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many requests for through-floor lifts in *(a)* the South and East and the *(b)* North and West Trust areas were made in the last 12 months; and in which areas such lifts are still to be installed. [98475]

Mr. George Howarth: The need for through floor lifts is normally identified following an assessment of an individual's needs and home environment by an Occupational Therapist. During the last 12 months South and East Belfast HSS Trust identified a total of 33 clients requiring a through floor lift although 10 clients later withdrew from the scheme. Four lifts have still to be installed by the Trust. In North and West Belfast HSS

Trust area 37 clients were identified as requiring a through floor lift in the last 12 months and 22 lifts have still to be installed by the Trust.

Health Investment

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has for investment in the National Health Service infrastructure in Northern Ireland. [99381]

Mr. George Howarth: Major hospitals in each of the four Health and Social Services Board Areas are being modernised or replaced. Within the next two years, the Causeway Hospital will come into operation, along with the Altnagelvin Hospital Nucleaus Extension. Following that, a major external refurbishment project will be completed at Craigavon Area Hospital, and the Phase 1 New Block at the Royal Victoria Hospital redevelopment will be completed. The total value of these projects is almost £139 million.

Construction of a £15 million local hospital at Downpatrick in County Down is planned to begin next year and is due to be completed in 2003.

Further investment is planned with a £28 million upgrading of Altnagelvin Hospital Tower Block, and Phase 2 of the Royal Victoria Hospital redevelopment estimated at £24 million.

A £30 million Regional Cancer Centre is planned, and detailed proposals are being drawn up for a Regional Medical Rehabilitation Centre and for a Medium Secure Unit for the mentally ill. It is anticipated that these projects will be procured under the Private Finance Initiative.

Railways

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will undertake an inquiry into the safety of the railway system in Northern Ireland. [99279]

Mr. George Howarth: NIR has a statutory duty to ensure the safety of operations on the network.

NIR commissioned consultants in March this year to conduct a strategic safety review of NIO's network and operations.

The final report should be available shortly.

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking to increase investment in the railway system outside the Belfast to Dublin line. [99280]

Mr. George Howarth: Work has recently commenced on the reinstatement of the Antrim Bleach Green line at a cost of approximately £17 million. In addition, work on a new Bangor Interchange Centre is in progress at a cost of £4.2 million.

The Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland has also examined opportunities for a Public Private Partnership (PPP) to meet future investment needs. It is expected that an announcement on the way forward will be made in the near future.

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking to improve the state of the Northern Ireland Railway's rolling stock. [99281]

Mr. George Howarth: It is acknowledged that much of the NIR class 80 rolling stock is nearing the end of its useful life and will need to be replaced over the coming years. To this end the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland has been examining opportunities for a Public Private Partnership (PPP) to meet the investment needs. A report on PPP options is expected in the near future and an announcement will follow when decisions have been made on the way forward. In view of the time scales involved in bringing forward any PPP option the Department is also examining the interim funding that would be required for rolling stock replacement.

Prisoners (Early Release)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the average resettlement grant made to prisoners released under the early releases scheme in Northern Ireland; who is responsible for distributing this money; what criteria are used in determining the levels of awards; and if he will make a statement. [100207]

Mr. Ingram: Prisoners in Northern Ireland do not receive resettlement grants.

Every prisoner, however, including those released by decision of the independent Sentence Review Commissioners under the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, is entitled to a Discharge Grant paid and administered by the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

The Discharge Grant is intended to ensure that each discharged inmate has enough money for his immediate needs and the rates are calculated to reflect the rate of Income Support Benefit currently in payment by the Social Security Agency.

Current rates, uprated in April 1999, are as follows:

A Standard Grant is payable at the rate of £40.70 for inmates aged 18 to 24 years and £51.40 for inmates aged 25 years and upwards.

A Higher Grant is payable at the rate of £103.81 to any inmate who satisfies the prison authorities that he or she is effectively homeless on discharge. The higher amount takes into account the average costs of hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation in Northern Ireland.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Pigmeat

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will take steps to ensure that all departments and public sector agencies require that pigmeat supplied under their catering contracts be produced according to UK welfare standards. [99057]

Ms Quin: We cannot dictate to public procurement authorities, but we will continue to seek to persuade them that buying to British welfare and other standards offers good value and meets the needs of their "customers".

To back up this message, my right hon. Friend the Minister has written to local councils and health authorities in England to emphasise the importance of sourcing to British standards. As the welfare legislation was passed in this House with an overwhelming majority, we also believe that every right hon. and hon. Member has a duty to raise this issue with public procurement authorities in their constituencies.

Climate Change Levy

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment his Ministry has made of the potential impact of the proposed climate change levy on the agricultural sector. [99049]

Ms Quin: It is not possible to say what the impact of the levy on the agricultural industry will be. That will depend on a number of factors, including future energy consumption and what use the industry makes of electricity generated from 'new' renewable sources of energy or in 'good quality' combined heat and power plants. The use the industry makes of the proposed system of enhanced capital allowances for energy saving investments will also have an impact. In addition certain sectors of the industry will be eligible for an 80 per cent. discount on the rates of the levy if they enter into energy saving agreements with the Government. All sectors of the industry will also benefit from the lower overall rates of the levy announced by the Chancellor in his pre-Budget Report statement.

Fur Farming

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he plans to *(a)* introduce and *(b)* facilitate the passage of a Bill banning fur farming within the current parliamentary session. [99119]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* A Bill to ban fur farming in England and Wales was introduced on 22 November. I understand the Scottish Executive will be introducing a separate Bill to extend the ban to Scotland.

Primates

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what regulatory requirements must be satisfied by persons seeking to export primates for experimentation purposes. [99138]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* The rules governing the export of primates from the UK to member states of the European Union are set down in Council Directive 92/65/EEC of 13 July 1992. These rules are implemented in Great Britain by the Animals and Animal Products (Import and Export) Regulations 1998 and in Northern Ireland by the Animals and Animal Products (Import and Export) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 (as amended).

Under this legislation primates may be traded within the EU only between institutes or establishments which have been approved by the competent authority. Commission Decision 92/65/EEC sets down detailed specifications for the approval of institutes or establishments engaged in the import and export of primates. An up-to-date list of all such approved premises is lodged with the European Commission.

Exported primates must be accompanied by official veterinary documentation confirming that the animals are in good health and that they originate from approved premises.

In the case of exports of primates to third countries, exporters are required to satisfy conditions agreed bilaterally between the UK and the importing country.

All primates exported from the UK are subject to rules introduced by The Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997. Exporters are required to give a written undertaking that arrangements have been made to comply with the terms of the EU Directive 91/628 on the protection of animals during transport. The animals must not be transported in a way that causes or could cause injury or unnecessary suffering. Strict rules covering the construction and maintenance of the receptacles and means of transport must be complied with.

Bee Diseases

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he is putting into effect to contain bee diseases in 2000. [99441]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 November 1999]:* The Government fund a range of measures in England through its bee health programme, which is delivered by the Central Science Laboratory's National Bee Unit. In 2000–01 the programme will cost £1.3 million. The measures include a free diagnostic service for varroa, American Foul Brood and European Foul Brood as well as providing training and guidance on how to improve bee husbandry to help control bee diseases. In addition, in 2000–01 MAFF expects to spend around £244,000 on research and development (mainly on varroa) to support our bee health work. This includes a four year project on the biological control of varroa.

Arrangements for bee health matters in Scotland and Wales are the responsibility of the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly respectively.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Shipbuilding

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he is taking to promote ship building and repair in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [99208]

Mr. Alan Johnson: To support and promote the UK shipbuilding industry, in July 1998 the Department established the Shipbuilding Forum whose membership comprises representatives of the shipbuilding and shiprepair industry, trades unions, equipment suppliers and customers, both private and public sector. Also involved are the National Training Organisation for the marine sector and relevant Government Departments. The Forum's terms of reference were to consider the current situation of the shipbuilding and shiprepair industry and how to improve its competitiveness so as to increase its share of the European market, leading to increased output,

profitability and employment. The Forum produced a Report (a copy of which was placed in the Library in May 1999) and a subsequent Implementation Plan containing Recommendations—more than 40—addressed to all the participants, not just to Government. The Forum believes that these Recommendations will go a long way towards improving the fortunes of the UK shipbuilding and shiprepair industry.

The Department has already implemented most of the Recommendations addressed to it, most of which related to improvements to the Shipbuilding Intervention Fund (SIF) and the Home Shipbuilding Credit Guarantee Scheme (HSCGS). The Department has agreed to include an element of profit in SIF calculation; has extended SIF to conversion contracts; and has extended access to SIF to a number of previously excluded yards. The HSCGS has been improved by allowing contacts offering "pure cover" and by allowing US dollar and euro financing. In addition my Department has supported financially two projects being undertaken by the Shipbuilders and Shiprepairers Association aimed at improving productivity in shipyards, both new building and repair/conversion.

As well as these measures we are working in the EU and the OECD to find effective international trade disciplines to tackle unfair trade practices, such as low pricing from Korea. The Industry Council achieved a positive conclusion on this issue at its meeting on 9 November, making clear the EU's determination to deal with Korean unfair pricing and agreeing further actions to this end, including re-engaging Korea in bilateral consultations and pursuing possible actions under the World Trade Organisation.

Post Office

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the principal activities of his Department and its agencies which provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices and *(b)* other post offices; if he will assess whether the level of business generated in each case is likely to increase or decrease over the next five years; and which new areas of business for post offices are likely to be developed by his Department and its agencies over the same period. [99554]

Mr. Alan Johnson: By the nature of their operations and activities, this Department and its agencies do not directly provide business for Crown or other post offices and this position is not expected to change over the next five years. Currently no specific new areas of business for post offices are foreseen by this department but the targets for electronic delivery of services (50 per cent. by 2005, 100 per cent. by 2008) represent a real opportunity for additional business for the Post Office network across all public services delivered by central Government. Moreover, equivalent targets are now being set for local Government and there is an opportunity for the Post Office network to gain further business in delivery of services which are the responsibility of local Government. In addition to these Modern Government initiatives, the potential to provide a wider range of banking and other financial services through the Horizon automated system could facilitate an increase in the levels of business generated by or with Government Departments and agencies.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many post offices there are in each parliamentary constituency; and how many of them transact more than 40 per cent. of their work volumes on behalf of the Benefits Agency. [99766]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 25 November 1999]:* I have obtained from the Post Office a list providing the information requested and have arranged for a copy to be placed in the Library of the House.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has approved the Post Office's five year Strategic Plan; and if he will make a statement. [100811]

Mr. Byers: I am pleased to announce Government approval of the Post Office's Strategic Plan for 1999–2004. This is a five year rolling Plan which will be updated annually. The Plan, as submitted by the Post Office Board meets the requirements set out in the Post Office White Paper (CM 4340) and represents a key element in the new arm's length relationship that the Government is now establishing with the Post Office in fulfilment of the reforms described in the White Paper. The Post Office will now be pursuing and developing their strategy and this will be reflected in the Plan for 2000–05, which the Board will be presenting to me next spring.

For the Post Office both to modernise and improve services to customers in this country and to develop into a significant global player in distribution markets poses tough challenges, but exciting opportunities. In an increasingly competitive market place for postal services these challenges should not be underestimated as the Post Office itself fully recognises. This means that the Post Office must successfully build on current initiatives and seize commercial opportunities as they arise in the UK and internationally.

The key features of the Strategic Plan are commercially confidential, and as such will not be published. However, on the basis of the Plan the Government have set a post-tax profit target of £350 million for the financial year 1999–2000. This figure excludes any exceptional provisions which may be made for the Horizon automation project. As already announced, the Government have set the external financing regime (excluding adjustments for Horizon and acquisitions) as 50 per cent. of the post-tax profits for this year, and therefore, if the Post Office achieves the profit target, this equivalent of a commercial dividend will be £175 million. In the unlikely event of the Post Office falling short of the profit target the minimum figure will be £140 million. The Post Office will not pay dividends until it becomes a plc but in the meantime will set aside the relevant amount in its reserves.

Employment Tribunals

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to allocate funding for a permanent hearing centre in North Wales for employment tribunal cases; and if he will make a statement. [99985]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Employment Tribunals Service is presently seeking to identify suitable premises in North Wales. Decisions on funding priorities for 2000–01 and beyond have not yet been taken.

Target Setting

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many targets have been agreed between his Department and (i) local authorities and (ii) other bodies apart from his own agencies and non-departmental bodies since May 1997. [99474]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* The Department's Public Service Agreement (PSA) sets out Departmental and Agency targets. The PSA includes two targets which are shared with HM Treasury and two shared with the Foreign Office. These apart, none of the targets have been agreed between the Department and (i) Local Authorities, or (ii) other bodies apart from the Department's own agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

Ilisu Dam

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the Government's current investment in the Ilisu Dam, Turkey; and if he will make a statement. [100056]

Mr. Caborn: The Government have provided no support for the Ilisu dam project. We have not yet made a decision on the application for export credit support from Balfour Beatty.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the meetings his Department has held with Balfour Beatty plc about the Ilisu Dam Project since 1 January 1998. [100170]

Mr. Caborn: Balfour Beatty has attended meetings with ECGD on:

23 June 1998

9 October 1998

9 April 1999

30 June 1999

9 July 1999

8 September 1999

30 September 1999

Balfour Beatty and ECGD have been present at meetings of the Export Credit Agencies and contractors on:

24 July 1998

18 December 1998

28 April 1999

Balfour Beatty was also present at meetings in Turkey on 12–13 May which the Minister for Trade held with Turkish officials, when Ilisu was discussed.

Trade Liberalisation

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what quantitative assessment the Government have made of the benefits and costs to the United Kingdom of a comprehensive multilateral trade round involving far-reaching liberalisation of trade in *(a)* agriculture, *(b)* manufacturing and *(c)* services. [99873]

Mr. Caborn: A number of studies have been published estimating substantial income gains to the world and the European Union from further trade liberalisation. Two recent ones are by the European Commission and the OECD. The Commission study covers agriculture, industrial tariffs and services; the OECD study does not include services. These studies do not provide separate estimates of the impact on the UK. However, on the assumption that the UK gains in line with its share of Community output and external trade, it is possible to provide a broad indication of the likely effects on the UK economy. On this basis, the European Commission and the OECD studies suggest that further trade liberalisation could bring income gains for the UK of between $8 billion and $19 billion (£5 billion and £11 billion) per year in terms of 1998 prices and incomes. This is equivalent to an income increase of between £210 and £480 per year for the average UK household. All such estimates are sensitive to assumptions made, particularly about the form, scope and scale of further liberalisation. I shall also be writing to the hon. Member with further information.

World Trade Organisation

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what formal representations have been made by *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials to the European Commission regarding the negotiating objectives for the forthcoming World Trade Organisation talks. [100277]

Mr. Caborn: UK Ministers have played a key role in shaping the EU's approach to the Seattle meeting where we hope that a new comprehensive round of trade negotiations will be launched. The EU's position was agreed by the Council of Ministers in formal Conclusions on 26 October. Trade Commissioner Lamy and Commission officials have been negotiating on behalf of the EU in Geneva on the basis of these formal Conclusions.

ECGD

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the environmental and ethical considerations that he has announced will apply to the ECGD. [100477]

Mr. Caborn: There has been no announcement about ethical or environmental considerations that will apply to ECGD. This is being addressed in the current review of ECGD's Mission and Status. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has announced the introduction of a screening process to facilitate the identification of environmentally sensitive cases.

Mr. Onllwyn Glyndwr Williams

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reasons Mr. Onllwyn Glyndwr Williams, a constituent of the hon. Member for Hereford, has not yet undergone spirometry testing for the purposes of his compensation claim against British Coal; and if he will make a statement. [99855]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Appointments for spirometry testing are being made on a regional basis according to an agreed order of priority which reflects age of claimant, age of claim and other relevant information. I understand that Mr. Williams will be receiving an appointment at his home in the course of next week.

Approximately 95 per cent. of the 43,000 living claimants identified as at May this year should now have been contacted to arrange an appointment, and nearly 30,000 tests have been conducted.

Corporate Assets

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the value of land and property in (i) Scotland, (ii) the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) total within the responsibility of the *(a)* Bio-technology and Biological Sciences Research Council, *(b)* Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Council, *(c)* Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, *(d)* Economic and Social Research Council, *(e)* Medical Research Council, *(f)* Natural Environment Research Council and *(g)* Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council. [99816]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Details of the total assets of the seven science Research Councils are published in their Annual Accounts and the latest DTI Annual Expenditure Plans Report (Cm4211). As expenditure from the Science Budget is deemed to be for the benefit of the UK as a whole, data are not collected in the form requested.

Video Recorders

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the Government's policy on the continuation of the EU import tariff on video recorders; and what representations on this it has received in the last 12 months. [100278]

Mr. Caborn: The Government's broad policy objective is to maximise the liberalisation of industrial tariffs world-wide including those of the EU. The consumer electronics industry has indicated, in response to a DTI consultative document on future tariff liberalisation published in May and on other occasions, that in exchange for greatly improved access to third-country markets it would welcome tariff reductions world-wide, including by the EU, on video recorders and all other consumer electronics.

Tweeddale Press Group

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the proposed acquisition of the Tweeddale Press Group by Johnston Press has been referred to the Competition Commission. [100080]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* I have issued a Press Notice inviting comments on the proposed transfer, a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

EU Structural Funding

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what arrangements he proposes to make to cover the anticipated time lag between the ending of the existing European structural funding on 31 December and the beginning of the transitional payments under the reformed system; and if he will make a statement. [100343]

Mr. Caborn: Projects approved within current Structural funds programmes by the end of this year can be co-financed until the end of 2001.

For projects approved within programmes that cover the new period 2000–2006, the Regulations provide for these to be co-financed from 1 January 2000, provided that the draft programmes have been lodged with the Commission by 31 April 2000.

These arrangements will ensure continuity of funding between the programming periods.

Private Recruitment Industry

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what assessment his Department has made concerning *(a)* the potential impact of proposals for the regulation of the private recruitment industry on job seekers over the age of 50 years and *(b)* the potential effects of restrictions of the charging by recruitment agencies of fees; and if he will make a statement; [99667]

(2) what assessment his Department has made of the effect of his proposals on the regulation of the private recruitment industry on the ability of hirers to fill vacancies in a timely fashion; [99668]

(3) what plans his Department has to establish a code of practice for the private recruitment industry as an alternative to regulation. [99669]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Except in respect of a few provisions specifically to protect those under 18 the proposals seek to protect the interests of those using bureaux equally, regardless of age. The effect of the proposals to restrict fee charging to hirers in certain circumstances are assessed in the Regulatory Impact Assessment in the consultation document. Changes to the controls on fee charging to workseekers are set out in Annex 1 of the document. The proposals seek to ensure both that bureaux are able to respond to hirers' requirements promptly and that neither hirers, workers nor third parties are put at risk as a consequence of bureaux not doing necessary checks to establish the suitability of those they are supplying. Careful consideration is being given to all the representations received. I have no plans to establish a code of practice. The reasons why this approach is not considered practicable are set out in chapter 4 of the consultation document.

Environmental Impact Assessment

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library a copy of the environmental assessment questionnaire which companies seeking cover from the ECGD will have to complete from 4 January 2000. [100415]

Mr. Caborn: A copy of ECGD's "Environmental Questionnaire" is being placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reason the announcement on 23 November imposing a requirement upon companies applying for credit insurance to the ECGD that they must provide an environmental impact assessment of projects in respect of which they seek cover, was not made to the House. [100411]

Mr. Caborn: The intention to introduce an enhanced environmental screening process was covered in the summer edition of ECGD News and was also mentioned in presentations at successive customer seminars. It is not customary to announce such procedural changes to the House.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who will judge and against what criteria whether an environmental impact assessment questionnaire completed by an applicant for ECGD cover meets the Government's requirements. [100416]

Mr. Caborn: The "Questionnaire" is simply designed to help ECGD Underwriters identify whether a case may be environmentally sensitive, and consider appropriate action.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library a copy of the regulatory impact assessment which has been carried out in respect of the new requirement upon companies applying for credit insurance to the ECGD that they must provide an environmental impact assessment of projects in respect of which they seek cover. [100413]

Mr. Caborn: A regulatory impact assessment is not appropriate in this case since the introduction of the enhanced environmental screening process does not involve Parliamentary legislation.

The environmental screening process being introduced is designed to facilitate the identification of environmentally sensitive cases. Companies will not have to provide an environmental impact assessment in all cases.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consultations were carried out with British industry and exporters prior to his announcement that applicants for credit guarantees to the Export Credits Guarantee Department will have to provide an Environmental Impact Assessment of the projects in respect of which they seek cover. [100412]

Mr. Caborn: A number of customers were consulted by ECGD about the form of a draft 'Environmental Questionnaire'. Environmental Impact Assessments will not be required in all cases.

Industrial Diseases

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what will be the *(a)* maximum and *(b)* minimum fee received by lawyers for work on any individual claim for compensation for (i) vibration white finger injuries and (ii) chronic bronchitis/emphysema. [100213]

Mrs. Liddell: Solicitor's costs and the precise circumstances in which those costs are met are detailed in the Handling Agreements for both diseases.

The agreed costs for most successful vibration white finger claims will be in the range of £600 plus VAT and reasonable disbursements, although in some cases the costs are dealt with on the merits of each case. For respiratory disease the agreed costs per successful claim range from £500 to £1,750 plus VAT and reasonable disbursements.

In addition to these costs the agreements also provide for the payment of costs for claims in particular instances, for example where the disputes procedures have been invoked or where complex special damages are being claimed.

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much of the provision he has made for the British Coal health liabilities in respect of compensation claims for *(a)* vibration white finger injuries and *(b)* chronic bronchitis and emphysema he estimates will be paid to lawyers in fees agreed under the scheme. [100212]

Mrs. Liddell: Solicitors costs are based on agreed tariffs set out in the Handling Agreements. It is not possible at this stage to forecast accurately the provision to cover these costs. The actual amounts paid will depend on the number of successful claims, the particular characteristics of these claims (for example, whether they have been settled by expedited payments) and the disbursements involved.

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what fees lawyers will receive under the scheme agreed for compensation for former miners suffering from *(a)* vibration white finger and *(b)* chronic bronchitis/emphysema in respect of claims which are unsuccessful. [100206]

Mrs. Liddell: Under the terms of the Handling Agreements negotiated for compensating former miners for these injuries, the Government meets the costs and reasonable disbursements of solicitors in successful claims. No such costs are reimbursed where the claim is unsuccessful. However, in the case of chronic bronchitis and emphysema in addition to the costs agreed for successful claims the Department has also agreed to make payments in respect of all claims on the Register (some 62,000) held by the Department's claim handlers as at 14 June 1999, whether the claimant is successful or not. These costs range from £25 to £100 per claim depending on the date of claim and number of claims held by the solicitor and are in recognition of client care work carried out after the Judgment and before the signing of the Agreement.

Insurance Industry

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the UK insurance industry about promoting plain English in insurance policies. [99594]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

Policy terms and conditions, and the way they are presented, are ultimately matters for individual insurers. However, the use of Plain English is to be encouraged, not least because of the commercial benefits that accrue from customer satisfaction.

The Association of British Insurers, whose members provide 96 per cent. of insurance in the United Kingdom, has promoted better practice. In this area, its Statement of General Insurance Practice notes that insurers will continue to develop more explicit proposal forms and policy documents, while bearing in mind the legal nature of insurance contracts.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to encourage the insurance industry to provide more information to customers about its practice of premium-loading after claims. [99593]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

None. It is for insurance companies themselves to determine the terms and conditions of their policies and the premiums that they charge in the light of their assessment of the perceived risk and the need to remain competitive.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Diplomatic Corps (Non-payment of Rates)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the names of the diplomatic missions and international organisations which have outstanding balances of over £10,000 as at 31 March in respect of national non-domestic rates. [99443]

Mr. Battle: Most missions and international organisations meet their obligations. However, at 31 March 1999, the following missions owed over £10,000 for national non-domestic rates:

Country	*Amount outstanding up to 31 March 1999 (£)*
Algeria	34,545.78
Bulgaria	149,468.19
Cameroon	22,323.83
Ghana	17,783.05
Iran	79,123.25
Jordan	27,601.50
Mozambique	28,554.63
Nigeria	314,714.57
Portugal	43,692.28
Senegal	10,927.33
Sierra Leone	49,576.00
Uganda	17,649.17
Yemen	27,561.83
Yugoslavia	43,734.21

Family Visit Appeals

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the cost to UK embassies and high commissions of the appeal system for family visits in each of the last five years. [99897]

Mr. Vaz: The Right of Appeal against the refusal of visas for visits was withdrawn in 1993. There has therefore been no extra cost to UK Embassies and High Commissions over the past five years in this respect. An appeal system for family visits is to be introduced within the next 12 months.

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent estimate he has made, in respect of each of the five posts overseas that deal with the greatest number of visitor applications, of the need for further entry clearance officers to deal with family visit appeals. [99898]

Mr. Vaz: All visa issuing posts have been asked to estimate the likely staffing implications arising from the new right of appeal for family visits, which is due to be introduced within the next twelve months. We are assessing the responses but no final decisions on additional staff will be taken until the implementation procedures are agreed.

Pakistan

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made about ensuring the safety of Ahmadiyya followers in Pakistan in the last two months. [99849]

Mr. Hain: We continue to raise our concerns about the position of Pakistan's Ahmadiyya community with the Pakistani authorities. We have noted General Musharraf's promise to Pakistan's minorities that their rights would be respected and that they would be treated as equal citizens. Our High Commissioner in Islamabad has underlined to General Musharraf and other members of his administration the need for the military authorities in Pakistan to maintain respect for human rights.

Falklands

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on opening negotiations with Argentina regarding the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands. [R] [100017]

Mr. Battle: There is no doubt about British sovereignty of the Falkland Islands, confirmed in international law. This is not negotiable. We are committed to defend the Islanders' right to determine their own future.

In consultation with the Falkland Islands Government, we continue to discuss with Argentina issues of common interest in the South Atlantic, for example the conservation of fish stocks, in order to improve the way we manage our differences with Argentina that arise from our respective positions on sovereignty. The British-Argentine Joint Statement of 14 July was a significant milestone in this process.

BBC World Television

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received about the contribution of BBC World Television to the promotion of British interests internationally; and if he will make a statement. [99997]

Mr. Hain: We have received no such representations. In July, a senior producer from BBC World wrote to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary about future funding of BBC World. In his reply, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear that, as BBC World was established as a commercial venture, he could see no possibility of Government taking on responsibility for its financing.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he plans to provide grant in aid from his Department's budget for BBC World Television; and if he will make a statement. [99996]

Mr. Hain: There are no plans to provide grant in aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's budget for BBC World. BBC World is a commercial operation funded by subscription and/or advertising. It is part of the BBC's commercial arm and is quite separate from the BBC World Service which is funded by parliamentary grant in aid.

Kosovo

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what legal advice he has obtained since the Kosovo campaign on the legality of the NATO intervention in Kosovo. [100089]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Throughout the Kosovo crisis, the Government took legal advice in accordance with standing procedures. They continue to do so as necessary. During the NATO air campaign, a series of cases was brought by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia against the UK and other NATO Allies before the International Court of Justice. The UK's defence in these proceedings has been handled by the Attorney-General in person, assisted by a legal team composed of officials and outside counsel. If the FRY persists in its case against the UK, we shall contest it vigorously.

Danube

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has had from *(a)* Bulgaria, *(b)* Hungary and *(c)* Romania on the clearing of the Danube. [100088]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* We are aware of, and share, the concerns of Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania about the blockages in the Danube caused by downed bridges at Novi Sad. The matter is currently under discussion within the Danube Commission at technical level, and within the EU. The last meeting of the General Affairs Council on 15 November confirmed the EU's willingness to provide the Danube states and the Danube Commission with active support in their efforts to devise and implement a solution, and that it was prepared to examine an EU contribution to the clearance on the Danube on the basis of proposals to be put forward by the Danube Commission.

The General Affairs Council also recalled however, that, under international law, the main responsibility for clearing the Danube lies with the FRY. It requested the Yugoslav authorities immediately and unconditionally to perform or allow the necessary clearance operations.

Stability Pact

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the cost of the UK contribution to the Stability Pact between its inception and 30 October. [100081]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* We anticipate that the UK's contribution to cover the costs of the inaugural Summit meeting of the Stability Pact, and the costs incurred in supporting the EU's Special Representative for the Stability Pact until 31 December 1999, will be approximately £225,000.

The Stability Pact is not intended to be a grant-giving organisation but we will continue to support the implementing agencies (EU, OSCE, IFIs etc.) through our regular contributions and on a case-by-case basis.

Iran

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the deaths of Iranian law enforcement personnel in a clash with drug traffickers on 3 November. [100337]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary greatly regrets these tragic deaths and sent a message of condolence to the Iranian Foreign Minister. They are another very distressing reflection of the efforts and commitment that Iran has made to combat the narcotics trade.

Hon. Members will recall that, in March this year, the UK donated £300,000 to the United Nations International Drugs Control Programme to provide Iranian frontier personnel with 1,020 bullet proof vests. I should like to announce that, following discussions with the Iranian authorities in Tehran over the weekend, the Government are donating a further £1 million to UNDCP for projects in Iran and separately giving £150,000 of bilateral drugs assistance. The UNDCP programme covers training and equipment primarily to strengthen counter-narcotics work at Iran's borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan. Our proposed bilateral assistance covers training and equipment for the border with Turkey and airport controls, areas not covered by the UNDCP programme. Our overall assistance package will improve the capacity of Iranian drugs control agencies to combat the traffickers and to stop drugs entering and leaving Iran.

No suppliers have yet been nominated for the goods covered by this assistance package. The export from the UK of some of the goods concerned may be subject to control and an export licence might need to be granted if they are sourced from the UK. If such a licence were granted, this could constitute an exception to our arms embargo on Iran and would be announced.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations Her Majesty's Government have made to the Iranian Government, and with what response, over the arrest and detention of those who took part in pro-democracy demonstrations in July. [100471]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary raised our concerns about these detentions with Foreign Minister Kharrazi during their meeting at the United Nations General Assembly on 21 September. He was told that should charges be brought against those detained, then they would receive a fair trial, and that any sentences would be subject to appeal.

A Resolution on the Human Rights situation in Iran was adopted on 18 November at the United Nations General Assembly. This resolution, tabled in conjunction with our EU partners, also underlined continuing international concern over these arrests.

Surveying Agreement

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the working of the agreement relating to co-operation in mapping, charting and geodesy signed at Feltham and Washington on 4 and 18 July 1985. [100344]

Mr. Battle: My noble Friend the Under-Secretary will write to the hon. Member.

British Citizenship

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* officials in his Department, *(b)* officials in other Departments and *(c)* others are currently working on the bill to restore British citizenship to the people of British Dependent Territories. [100312]

Mr. Battle: A joint Steering Group of Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Home Office officials has been established to work on the British citizenship offer to be contained in the Overseas Territories Bill. The Steering Group membership comprises a core of some 10 people of whom six are FCO officials and the rest from the Home Office. They are supported by other members of the Overseas Territories Department of the FCO who are involved in the implementation of the White Paper. Consultations are being held with Overseas Territory Governments.

Chinese President (State Visit)

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what written record was kept of the *(a)* proceedings and *(b)* conclusions reached at meetings between the Metropolitan Police and his Department's officials in relation to the Chinese President's State Visit. [100420]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 4 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 271–72W.

"Your Britain Your Europe" Campaign

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to what extent the costs of the "Your Britain Your Europe" campaign and the tour of the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), of the UK are being met from public funds. [100319]

Mr. Vaz: The costs of the "Your Britain Your Europe" Roadshow are estimated at £60,000, plus travel and accommodation.

It is Government policy to set out the benefits of the UK's membership of the EU. One of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's publicly declared performance targets is:

"a step change in the UK's relations with the rest of Europe, with increasing public support for EU activities".

The Roadshow is excellent value for money, with 23 events in 11 cities in five days. We are working with a number of business, educational and other organisations which are providing their time and resources free of charge.

Sri Lanka

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received concerning the killings in Madhu Church, Manar, Sri Lanka. [100134]

Mr. Hain: None. I deeply regret the loss of civilian life in this incident. I urge all parties to this tragic conflict to do their utmost to avoid civilian casualties.

Export Licences (Bahrain)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the six ML1 SIELS and one ML1 open individual export licences for exports to Bahrain this year. [100135]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave on 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 148-49W.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

David Cocks and Jonathan Goldberg

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Solicitor-General what were the total sums received from public funds by David Cocks and Jonathan Goldberg in the period from the beginning of 1994 to the latest date for which he has figures. [99331]

The Solicitor-General: I will write to my hon. Friend shortly.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Heathrow Airport

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce the decision on Part 2 of the second stage consultation on options for changes to the preferential use of Heathrow Airport's runways at night. [99218]

Mr. Mullin: The Government announced their decision on 23 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 62-65W.

Homelessness (Merseyside)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what the primary reasons were for families becoming homeless within Merseyside in each year since 1993; [98601]

(2) what the primary reasons were for homelessness on Merseyside in the most recent year for which figures are available, broken down by gender. [98598]

Mr. Mullin: Data are reported to the Department each quarter by local authorities on their activity under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing

Acts. These identify the main reasons for loss of last settled home of homeless households accepted by local authorities as in priority need. Further classification by gender, or household type, is not collected. The following table summarises information provided by authorities in Merseyside since 1993:

Homeless households in Merseyside authorities: reasons for loss of last settled home

	1993	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Relatives/Friends no longer able or willing to accommodate						
Parents	1,285	895	621	483	336	347
Friends	284	440	293	228	195	173
Breakdown of relationship						
Violent	476	786	482	410	390	395
Non-violent	166	170	171	158	120	86
Arrears of						
Mortgage	203	198	189	177	127	141
Rent	37	28	43	27	26	57
End of assured shorthold tenancy	204	246	320	289	253	230
Loss of other rented/tied housing	187	233	242	184	339	286
Institution or care	160	174	130	143	95	83
Other reasons	589	435	435	484	212	197
Total households accepted	3,591	3,305	2,926	2,583	2,093	1,995

Note:
Prior to 1997, reported figures include a small number of households not in priority need.

Homelessness (Sefton)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many children formed part of families made homeless in Sefton in each year since 1996. [98600]

Mr. Mullin: Data are reported to the Department each quarter by local authorities on their activity under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts. Information is not collected on the numbers of children in homeless families. The following table provides for Sefton the available data on the numbers of households with dependent children accepted as homeless.

Households accepted by the authority as unintentionally homeless and in priority need

	1996	*1997*	*1998*
Total	166	106	109
Number with dependent children	109	75	78
Of which:			
1 child	—	25	29
2 children	—	27	28
3 children	—	22	21

Genetically Modified Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library a copy of the voluntary agreement on the commercial growing of genetically modified crops between his Department and SCIMAC, which he announced on 5 November. [99543]

Mr. Meacher: Yes. The details of the voluntary agreement on the commercial growing of genetically modified crops between my Department and SCIMAC are publicly available and a copy will be placed in the Library.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list research contracts controlled by his Department for work associated with the genetically modified crop farm-scale trials. [99536]

Mr. Meacher: The Department currently has three contracts in place covering farm scale trials of genetically modified crops and farmland wildlife, worth £3.3 million. The contracts are as follows:

Contract	*Lead contractor*	*Start date*	*Completion date*
Winter oilseed rape	Institute of Arable Crops Research	9 April 1999	31 December 2003
Spring oilseed rape	Scottish Crop Research Institute	9 April 1999	31 December 2002
Maize	NERC Institute of Terrestrial Ecology	9 April 1999	31 December 2002

GM Farm-scale Trials

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the payments made to farmers hosting the genetically modified farm-scale trials; and whether the payments include *(a)* a fee for managing the farm-scale trial crop, *(b)* compensation for loss of income from the land growing the farm-scale crop and *(c)* a fee for taking part in the farm scale trial. [99541]

Mr. Meacher: The Department has no involvement in any payments made to farmers for taking part in the farm-scale evaluations of GM crops, nor is it party to any such arrangements. All fields and crops are provided by the industry group SCIMAC (supply chain initiative on modified agricultural crops).

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the method and date of destruction and disposal used for the harvested crops from the 1999 genetically modified farm-scale trial of fodder maize at Little Park Farm, Beech Hill Road, Mortimer, Berkshire. [99540]

Mr. Meacher: The genetically modified farm-scale trial of fodder maize at Little Park Farm, Beech Hill Road, Mortimer, Berkshire was harvested in early October 1999. The harvested crop was then mechanically chopped and ploughed back into the ground.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the criteria used by the Farm-Scale Trials Scientific Steering Committee for the selection of farms to take part in the farm-scale trials. [99542]

Mr. Meacher: The criteria for selecting farms to take part in the farm-scale evaluations are still under discussion by the research contractors and the Scientific Steering Committee. The issue was discussed at the first and second meetings of the Scientific Steering Committee and the Committee's opinions are recorded in the minutes which have been published.

The intention is to compare the GM crops with the non-GM equivalent crops grown and managed using a range of current agricultural practices and distributed throughout the normal geographic range for that particular crop.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish a list of the crop varieties, including the respective companies which developed them, so far proposed by SCIMAC for the inclusion in the genetically modified crop farm-scale trials. [99538]

Mr. Meacher: The crops provided by SCIMAC for the farm-scale evaluations are fodder maize and oil seed rape, which are genetically modified to be tolerant to glufosinate ammonium. AgrEvo UK Limited have developed these crops.

The trait has been bred into varieties of maize and oil seed rape (both spring-sown and autumn-sown) suitable for growing in the UK. The intention is that only one variety of fodder maize, and one variety each of spring-sown and autumn-sown oil seed rape, will be used in the farm-scale evaluations as the results will be generic in nature.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish a copy of the protocols for the management of the GM farm-scale trials for each crop and each variety planted. [99544]

Mr. Meacher: All GM crops in the farm-scale evaluations will be grown in accordance with the SCIMAC (supply chain initiative on modified agricultural crops) guidelines, the industry code for good practice. These guidelines have been published. A copy has been placed in the House Library.

The approval for the herbicide sets out the protocol for its use. This has been seen and approved by the scientific steering committee, but is not fully published yet. It is intended that this information be published as soon as possible.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on which dates the crops in the 1999 genetically modified crop farm-scale trials were sown and harvested involving fodder maize at Walnut Tree Farm, Lyng, Norfolk, crops at *(a)* Home Farm, Spittle-in-the-Street, Glentham, Lincolnshire, *(b)* Little Park Farm, Beech Hill Road, Mortimer, Reading, Berkshire, and *(c)* Rothampsted Experimental Station, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, and spring oilseed rape at Advanta Seed, Booth Graffoe, Lincoln, and Model Farm, Shirburn, Watlington, Oxfordshire. [99539]

Mr. Meacher: The fodder maize crop at Walnut Tree Farm, Lyng, Norfolk was sown on 7 May 1999 and harvested in early October. The fodder maize crop at Home Farm, Spittle-in-the-Street, Glentham, Lincolnshire was sown on 18 May 1999 and harvested in early October. The fodder maize crop at Little Park Farm, Beech Hill Road, Mortimer, Reading, Berkshire was sown on 10 May 1999 and harvested in early October. The fodder maize crop at Rothamsted Experimental Station, Harpenden, Hertfordshire was sown on 12 May 1999 and harvested on 22 September.

The spring oil seed rape crop at Advanta Seed, Boothby Graffoe, Lincoln was sown on 28 April 1999 and harvested on 1 September 1999. The spring oil seed rape crop at Model Farm, Shirburn, Watlington, Oxfordshire was sown on 29 April 1999 and harvested on 2 September 1999.

Central Railways

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what new proposals have been submitted to his Department by the company seeking to develop the Central Railways project; and if he will make a statement. [99630]

Mr. Hill: We are aware that Central Railway plc has been consulting about its proposal for a freight and passenger railway between Liverpool and Lille, via London. Ministers have received copies of the company's consultation documents but have not taken a view on the scheme.

If Central Railway plc is to proceed with the scheme it will have to apply for an Order under the Transport and Works Acts 1992. We understand that the company hopes to submit an application next year. The company's previous application in 1996 was rejected by Parliament. As was the case last time, the company will be obliged to consult on any applications and affected parties will have the right to put forward their views.

John Harrison

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he received a report on the Louth District Coroners Court hearing into the death of coastguard John Harrison; and what action he has undertaken. [99621]

Mr. Hill: No report into the death of Coastguard John Harrison from Louth District Coroners Court has been received by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. The Louth District Coroners Court office has confirmed that no report has been issued.

Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date the Maritime and Coastguard Agency achieved its Charter Mark. [99612]

Mr. Hill: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has not applied for a Charter Mark yet, in view of the changes the agency has undergone since its formation. The MCA is committed to a high level of customer service and has 15 Service Standards which cover the business activities of the whole agency.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions in the last 12 months the automatic data retrieval system has failed to function at *(a)* Oban, *(b)* Shetland and *(c)* Pentland Coastguard stations. [99615]

Mr. Hill: The Action Data System (ADAS) has failed twice in the last 12 months at these stations—once at Pentland and once at Oban. At Oban the failure was caused by an engineer shutting off the power, followed by a temporary failure of the auxiliary electricity supply. On both occasions, the system was restarted within an hour.

Other minor problems have been experienced which have affected printers or individual terminals, but none of these has resulted in a failure of the whole system.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will instigate an inquiry into charges of bullying and intimidation of coastguard officers by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency Management. [99613]

Mr. Hill: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency has a well established grievance procedure for handling complaints from its staff. Both cases of bullying and intimidation reported under the procedure during 1999 have been investigated using this procedure which has been agreed with Trade Unions.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what experiments have been carried out to establish the response times necessary to respond physically to emergency calls at present covered by Oban Coastguard. [99617]

Mr. Hill: No experiments have been carried out to establish Coastguard response times as these are covered by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) Service Standards. The target response time for a Coastguard presence at the reported scene of an incident in the area covered by the Oban Coastguard District is 30 minutes. This is a national target response time which is reported to the MCA Headquarters monthly, and reviewed locally by Coastguard management, through regular operational readiness inspections. The expectation is that this target will be met 95 per cent. of the time, since some remote locations can cause teams to take up to an hour to arrive.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the digital computer system for the new Maritime and Coastguard Agency communications system is operational. [99614]

Mr. Hill: The Action Data System, as modified for compliance for the year 2000 (ADAS 2000), is used to record data about incidents dealt with by HMCG. This system was operational at all Coastguard Stations by September 1999. The new Integrated Coastguard Communication System (ICCS) will replace the existing equipment which is nearing the end of its life. Operational roll out will start in May 2000, and finish three years later.

Proprietorial Schools

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what discussions he has with the Department for Education and Employment concerning the impact on proprietorial schools of his decision not to issue permits to such schools under Section 19 of the Transport Act 1985; [99760]

(2) how many proprietorial schools have registered as public service operators following a decision not to grant them permits to operate a minibus under Section 19 of the Transport Act 1985. [99761]

Mr. Hill: It has always been the case that only vehicles that are not being used with a view to profit may be operated under a permit issued under Section 19 of the Transport Act 1985. Decisions on whether particular applicants are eligible under the terms of Section 19 are for the Traffic Commissioners not my Department. I understand that there have been a small number of recent cases where proprietorial schools have applied for a public service vehicle operator's licence after having been ruled ineligible for a Section 19 permit by the Traffic Commissioner.

There have been no discussions between my Department and the Department for Education and Employment on this particular issue.

Health and Safety Laboratory

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Health and Safety Laboratory intends to publish its Annual report and Accounts for 1998–99. [100474]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Laboratory has today published the 1998–99 Annual Report and Accounts, and copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Cement

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received on the use of alternative fuels for the production of cement. [100023]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The use of alternative fuels for the production of cement has raised a significant amount of public interest. The Department has received a number of representations from local communities where cement kilns are situated, environmental pressure groups, as well as representations from the cement industry itself.

Regional Development Agencies

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is

taking to ensure that regional development agencies are responsible for promoting a sustainable energy policy within their region. [100455]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The new UK Sustainable Development Strategy, published in May this year, said that the Government wished to see high level sustainable development frameworks for each English region by the end of 2000. These frameworks will set out a regional vision for sustainable development. They will need to have the support of a wide range of stakeholders and should be agreed by Regional Chambers. Although they will not be in the lead, RDAs will be one of the key partners in the preparation of frameworks.

One of the tasks identified for these frameworks will be to build consensus on how the national policy and target on renewable energy will be taken forward in each region. Government Offices are initiating work to produce regional assessments and targets for renewable energy provision based on regional resource studies. The Government hope that frameworks will draw upon this work and elaborate a regional approach to renewable energy delivery, including regional targets.

The frameworks should take account of issues raised by the RDA strategies for sustainable development and, in turn, will inform future revisions of the RDA strategies.

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people are employed by each of the regional development agencies; and what have been their administration costs since their establishment. [100464]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The table shows the number of full-time equivalent staff in the Regional Development Agencies, as at 1 April 1999 (the most recent figures available); the administration costs for the period December 1998 to April 1999, when the Agencies were being set up; and administration budgets for the current financial year.

£000

Regional Development Agency	*Staff*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
One North East	203	2,395	9,771
North West	[1]182	327	12,131
Yorkshire Forward	174.5	403	8,036
East Midlands	107	406	7,155
Advantage West Midlands	118.5	384	7,678
East of England	38	350	4,803
South East	60	411	5,225
South West	143	461	7,488
Total	1,026	5,137	62,287

[1] Total staff, not full-time equivalents. No separate figure for part-time staff available.

Signals (Millennium Compliance)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if all *(a)* road traffic signals systems and *(b)* rail signals systems are millennium compliant; and if he will make a statement. [100078]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The millennium readiness of road traffic signals systems and national railways signals systems has been assessed under Action 2000's Independent Assessment Programme. These assessments concluded that all safety critical and business continuity systems within the local and national road sectors in England, and the national railways sector in Great Britain, were 100 per cent. blue—indicating that the assessments have identified no risk of material disruption. Full details are available on Action 2000's website (www.bu[illegible]000.co.uk).

Public Transport (Millennium Holiday)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about public transport arrangements for new year's eve and new year's day. [100077]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The details of transport provision over the Millennium period are primarily a matter for decisions and announcement by individual transport operators taking account of local needs and in consultation with local authorities and other relevant bodies. Many bus and rail transport providers will operate special timetables to enable members of the public to get to and from Millennium celebrations. In developing such timetables, operators have maintained close contact with police and emergency services.

Disabled Facilities Grant

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the operation of the disabled facilities grant to ensure that it provides prompt and sympathetic treatment for those with degenerative conditions. [99063]

Mr. Mullin: My Department keeps the operation of disabled facilities grants under regular review, to ensure that they continue to provide prompt and sympathetic treatment for all disabled people who need adaptations to their homes. The allowances in the test of resources are reviewed and uprated annually, to ensure that they reflect changes in living costs. Last year, we announced that we would increase the resources available for the grant by a quarter over the following three years, and this should enable local authorities to deal with applications more promptly. Local authorities are required by law to deal with applications as quickly as possible, and we advise them in guidance to ensure that applicants with the most pressing needs are dealt with first.

Transport Council

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of EU transport ministers. [100499]

Mr. Hill: The proposed agenda for the 9–10 December Transport Council comprises the following items.

1. Adoption of the agenda.
2. Approval of "A" points.

Maritime Transport

3. Commission Communications on short sea shipping.

Horizontal Issues

4. Commission Communication on intermodality and intermodal freight transport;
5. Galileo satellite navigation project.

Land Transport

6. New developments for European railways (including rail infrastructure, rail interoperability and alleviation of bottlenecks);

7. Working time in road transport;

Air Transport

8. Short and long term perspectives on aviation noise;

9. Establishment of a European Aviation Safety Authority

10. Air Transport negotiations with Central and Eastern European countries;

11. Commission Communication on air traffic management

12. Other business

Inverness Airport

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many flights there were *(a)* into and *(b)* out of Inverness airport, in each of the last three years. [100307]

Mr. Mullin: Data on aircraft movements are collected by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA). The CAA data does not distinguish between a take-off and a landing referring only to aircraft movements which can be either a take-off or a landing. The last three years for which there is a full year's data are 1996, 1997 and 1998.

In 1996 there were 26,776 aircraft movements at Inverness airport.

In 1997 there were 22,475 aircraft movements.

In 1998 there were 26,875 aircraft movements.

Disused Railway Lines

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many disused railway lines have been re-opened since 1969; and what was the cost to public funds in each case. [100580]

Mr. Hill: This information is not readily available.

Council Housing

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to synchronize secured and assured tenancy regulations in connection with the large-scale voluntary transfer scheme of council houses; and if he will make a statement. [100095]

Mr. Mullin: I am aware of the discussion paper published by the Chartered Institute of Housing on a single form of tenancy for social housing. It is an interesting proposal which the Department will bear in mind in developing the contents of any forthcoming Housing Green Paper.

Correspondence

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Woking concerning the law on abandoned vehicles, dated 17 September, forwarded to him by the Home Office in October. [100419]

Mr. Hill: My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary wrote to the hon. Member on 26 November.

Green Ministers Committee

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the actions taken by the Green Ministers Committee since its formation. [99927]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The Green Ministers Committee has made good progress since May 1997 and has met seven times. I refer the hon. Member to the replies I have given previously announcing the actions taken at each meeting.

To my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) on 22 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 22W, with regard to the outcome of the Committee's meeting in November 1999.

To my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon) on 16 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 341W, with regard to the outcome of the Committee's meeting in July 1999.

To the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 24 March 1999, *Official Report*, column 248W, with regard to the outcome of the Committee's meeting in March 1999.

To my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) on 25 November 1998, *Official Report*, column 5W, with regard to the outcome of the Committee's meeting in November 1998.

To the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 29 June 1998, *Official Report*, column 90W, with regard to the outcome of the Committee's meeting in June 1998.

To the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 17 March 1998, *Official Report*, column 546W, with regard to the outcome of the Committee's meeting in December 1997.

To my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley (Mr. Lewis) on 31 July 1997, *Official Report*, column 542W, with regard to the outcome of the Committee's meeting in July 1997.

The Committee published its first annual report on its activities, "Greening Government: the first annual report of Green Ministers 1998/99" in July 1999. It sets out achievements and a future work programme across a wide range of activities.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Child Care

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many places with registered forms of child care there have been for each quarter of 1999 in England. [98664]

Ms Hodge: Information, which is collected annually, is not available in the precise form requested. The available information is shown in the following table.

Children's day care provision in England as at 31 March 1999 (provisional)

	Providers	Child care places
Day Nurseries	7,000	247,700
Playgroups	15,000	347,200
Child minders	82,200	336,600
Out of School Clubs	3,800	113,800
Holiday Schemes	10,200	435,300

Note:
Data compiled from information provided by local authorities. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 100. Provision may be made by local authorities, voluntary or private organisations register under Part X of the Children Act 1989 or exempt from registration. Where complete information was not available, some estimates have been made. Holiday schemes are counted once for each holiday period in which they operate.

Merseyside Training and Enterprise Council

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what *(a)* performance indicators and *(b)* output measures are used to measure the (i) absolute and (ii) relative performance of Merseyside TEC. [98569]

Mr. Wicks: The indicators used to measure performance of all Training and Enterprise Councils (including Chambers of Commerce, Training and Enterprise) are:

Work based training for young people:
- NVQs per 100 leavers
- NVQ2s per 100 leavers
- NVQ3+s per 100 leavers
- Cost per point
- Percentage other training trainees who found training very/fairly useful
- Percentage ethnic minority leavers gaining at least one whole NVQ
- Percentage non ethnic minority leavers gaining at least one whole NVQ
- Percentage disabled leavers gaining at least one whole NVQ
- Percentage non disabled leavers gaining at least one whole NVQ

Work based training for adults:
- Jobs per 100 leavers
- NVQs per 100 leavers
- Cost per point
- Percentage ethnic minority leavers gaining at least one whole NVQ
- Percentage non ethnic minority leavers gaining at least one whole NVQ
- Percentage disabled leavers gaining at least one whole NVQ
- Percentage non disabled leavers gaining at least one whole NVQ

Investors in People:
- Percentage medium/large companies recognised as an Investor in People
- Percentage large (200+) companies recognised as an Investor in People.

Performance information for all TECs is collated and published annually. A copy of the publication "TEC/CCTE Performance Indicators 1998–99" has been placed in the Library. The publication shows the absolute performance of Merseyside TEC against a range of indicators and makes relative comparison with TECs within the North West and in England as a whole.

Equal Opportunities Legislation

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when his Department will give its considered response to the Equal Opportunities Commission's proposal for reform of equal opportunities legislation. [98680]

Ms Hodge: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) on 14 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 194W.

Training and Enterprise Councils

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what level of funding was received by each TEC in the north-west and north-east in the last financial year. [98515]

Mr. Wicks: Information relating to the funding of Training and Enterprise Councils (including Chambers of Commerce, Training and Enterprise) can be found in the individual or group TEC/CCTE Statutory Accounts for 1998–99 filed in the Library.

The following table shows the income reported in the 1998–99 Statutory Accounts:

Reported income 1998–99 statutory accounts

	£
North-East	
County Durham	17,193,770
Northumberland	18,404,012
Tees Valley	31,403,000
Tyneside	32,321,000
Sunderland City	13,609,590
North-West	
Bolton Bury	14,013,044
Manchester	45,721,464
Wigan	12,648,226
Oldham	7,159,008
Rochdale	8,920,382
South and East Cheshire	14,322,311
Stockport and High Peak	11,709,431
Cumbria	19,931,255
Eltec (East Lancs)	19,519,119
Lawtec (Lancashire Area West)	25,792,672
North and Mid Cheshire	14,549,521
Cewtec (Cheshire, Ellesmere Port and Wirral)	18,499,595
Merseyside	42,390,021
St. Helens	10,236,787

Early Years Education

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice since May 1997 he has given to local education authorities on funding early years provision *(a)* at school and *(b)* at pre-school nurseries. [100008]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have provided policy and funding guidance to Local Education Authorities and early years settings through the "Requirements of Nursery Education Grant" document as well as our "Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership Planning Guidance", both of which are distributed annually. The guidance makes clear that early years provision must be

provided across all sectors, be appropriate to the age of the children and that new places for three year olds must not be in reception classes.

Child Counselling

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to ensure that a child counselling service is available for all schools in England and Wales. [100187]

Jacqui Smith: The Government are already supporting a range of counselling services for pupils in schools. We are proposing to develop these further, for example, through our funding of a national mentoring network. The planned youth support service, to be introduced in 2001, will ensure that young people aged 13 to 19 have access to the specialist support they need. Provision in Wales is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

School Transport

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which local education authorities provide school transport *(a)* free of charge to all school pupils travelling a distance of over (i) three miles, for secondary pupils, and (ii) two miles, for primary pupils, and *(b)* free of charge as in *(a)* to pupils below the age of 16 years, but charge pupils when they become 16 years; and what savings on such travel costs those local education authorities that charge post-16 year olds to travel make. [100005]

Jacqui Smith: This information is not held centrally.

Education Action Zones

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each education action zone the total amount of private sector resource included in the original bids broken down by *(a)* cash support, *(b)* equipment, *(c)* consultancy and *(d)* other. [100066]

Ms Estelle Morris: The original bids did not contain the requested degree of detail. Figures for the private sector contributions to the 25 round 1 Education Action Zones will be available as part of the annual audited accounts. The National Audit Office will lay the 25 sets of accounts before Parliament. The NAO expects to lay the first of these in December.

Swimming

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he has given to local authorities regarding the provision of time for swimming within the national curriculum. [100229]

Jacqui Smith: The amount of time to be spent on swimming is not prescribed, but primary schools must ensure that, by age 11, pupils have been taught:

to swim unaided, competently and safely, for at least 25 metres;

to develop confidence in water, and how to rest, float and adopt support positions;

a variety of means of propulsion using either arms or legs or both, and how to develop effective and efficient swimming strokes on the front and the back;

the principles and skills of water safety and survival.

Swimming has remained a compulsory element of the primary curriculum between September 1998 and September 2000 (while the full programmes of study for the non core subjects have been relaxed to allow the literacy and numeracy strategies to be given priority) and will continue to be compulsory in the new National Curriculum for September 2000.

School Funding

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of school funding by local education authorities came through the *(a)* standard spending assessment and *(b)* the Standards Fund for (i) 1997–98, and (ii) 1998–99; and what are the projected figures for (A) 1999–2000, and (B) 2000–01. [100092]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table sets out the proportions of Education Total Standard Spending provided through central government grant to the Standards Fund, LEA contributions to the Standards Fund, and through SSAs (minus LEAs' matching contributions). Over this period grant from the DfEE will increase from £211 million to £1,077 million. Funding devolved to schools from the Standards Fund was £563 million in 1999–2000.

Percentage

Year	*Standards Fund grant*	*LEA contributions*	*SSA minus LEA contributions*
1997–98	1.2	0.6	98.2
1998–99	1.7	1.1	97.2
1999–2000	2.7	1.9	95.4
2000–01 (estimate)	4.8	2.8	92.4

Disability Rights Commission

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the proposed disability rights commission will have power to review the performance of social security appeals tribunals. [99091]

Ms Hodge: The functions of social security appeal tribunals will be transferred to the new unified appeal tribunals from 29 November 1999. The Disability Rights Commission will have the power to review the performance of these appeal tribunals in so far as it is carrying out its functions and duties under the Disability Rights Commission Act 1999, in particular, its duty to take such steps as it considers appropriate to encourage good practice in the treatment of disabled persons. For example, the Commission may, for a purpose connected with the performance of its functions, carry out research or provide advice or information, or make proposals or give other advice to any Government agency or other public authority as to the practical application of any law. The Commission may also decide to conduct a general formal investigation into the activities of the appeal tribunals for any purpose connected with the performance of its duties.

Pop Music (School Performances)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he takes to ensure children in primary schools are not subject to commercial pressure by pop music bands performing in those schools. [100346]

Ms Estelle Morris: This is a matter for individual schools to decide.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefits (Savings)

17. **Mr. Todd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will review the limits on savings relating to benefits administered by his Department. [99079]

Mr. Bayley: The Pensions Green Paper outlined our commitment to looking at ways to better reward savers. We will bring forward our proposals later in this Parliament.

Earnings Allowances

19. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many Reduced Earnings Allowance cases are currently in the appeal system. [99081]

Angela Eagle: The Appeals Service currently hold 2,410 appeals relating to Reduced Earnings Allowance. Of these appeals 1,609 cases are held pending a decision of the European Court of Justice on lead cases.

CSA (Inland Revenue)

20. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measures he intends to take to allow information about income presently in the possession of the Inland Revenue to be shared with the Child Support Agency. [99082]

Angela Eagle: It is not right that some self-employed non-resident parents avoid their obligations to their children by refusing to provide details of their income to the Child Support Agency. That is why the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 gives the Child Support Agency access to information held by the Inland Revenue about the earnings of self-employed non-resident parents.

Means-tested Benefits (Pensioners)

21. **Dr. Lynne Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the Government's proposals for reducing the numbers of pensioners reliant on means-tested benefits. [99083]

Mr. Rooker: We are pressing on with our pensions reforms. Reforming the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme through the introduction of the State Second Pension is the final stage of our pensions strategy, following stakeholder pension schemes and the Minimum Income Guarantee. This will give more help in retirement to low and moderate earners, carers and some long-term disabled people with broken work records. By 2038, everyone who has a working life of employment or caring will retire with a State Pension above the means-tested threshold.

24. **Mr. Kirkwood:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the results available from the pilot schemes to increase the rate of take-up of means-tested benefits for those past state retirement age. [99087]

Mr. Rooker: The evaluation of the pilot initiatives will be published later this year.

Housing Benefit

22. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his proposals to reform housing benefit. [99084]

Angela Eagle: We intend to publish a Housing Green Paper in due course. This will present proposals for Housing Benefit within the overall strategy for Housing .

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to reduce scope for error and fraud in the housing benefit system; and if he will make a statement. [99635]

Mr. Rooker: We are committed to taking tough action to combat Housing Benefit fraud. We have:

reformed the anti-fraud financial incentive scheme for local authorities to ensure that they are rewarded for detecting cases of fraud;

made an additional £100 million available over the next three years to encourage local authorities to adopt the Verification Framework, which, through a series of checks throughout the period of a benefit claim, will help make Housing Benefit administration more secure;

invited all local authorities to participate in the Royal Mail "do not redirect" initiative which prevents benefit claimants from using Royal Mail's postal redirection arrangements to make false claims to benefit from multiple addresses. Already, over 200 local authorities are operating this scheme and many more are preparing to implement it;

made over £4 million available to install computer terminals in local authorities which provide access to the Department's benefit systems. We are now looking to extend this initiative to include exchanging information electronically between local authorities and the Department, providing further scope to prevent fraud and error occurring.

Carers

23. **Mrs. Virginia Bottomley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he last met the Carers National Association to discuss support for carers. [R] [99086]

Mr. Bayley: I visited the headquarters of the Carers National Association on 29 June 1999 to discuss various issues of concern to carers. I was the keynote speaker at a CNA meeting in September and participated in an any questions panel with their Deputy Chief Executive last month. I value the Association's expertise and experience and I keep in touch with them.

Child Support Reform

25. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received concerning the use of a default rate to calculate maintenance payments under the new proposals for reforming child support. [99088]

Angela Eagle: The White Paper published on 1 July gave details of our plans to impose a default rate of maintenance liability. It is important that maintenance starts flowing quickly and reliably to children. Where exceptionally it is clear that there is going to be a delay in assessing maintenance, we plan to impose a default rate until the CSA has enough information to calculate the true liability.

We have not received any representations on this issue.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to amend section 6(1) of the Child Support Act 1991. [100103]

Angela Eagle: Our plans for the reform of child support were published in the White Paper "Children's Rights and Parent's Responsibilities" (Cm 4349) on 1 July 1999. Legislation announced in the Queen's Speech in November 1999 will set out the detail of the reforms.

Section 6(1) of the 1991 Act provides that parents with care on Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance can be required to apply for child support. Our plans to change this provision were set out in Chapter 4 of the White Paper. Currently, child support arrangements cannot be made unless a parent specifically applies for maintenance. While every effort is made to ensure parents with care are not put at risk by the child support process, this rule can actually increase the risk that parents face. This is because when non-resident parents receive notification that the parent with care had applied for child support, some feel that they have been 'shopped' to the Department of Social Security.

Under the new scheme, it is planned that a separate application for maintenance will not be required for parents with care on benefit. Claiming Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance will be enough to start the child support process, unless a parent with care specifically asks us not to pursue maintenance. A parent with care who opts out will be asked to show that she has good cause for doing so. If it is clear that the child support process would cause her or her children harm or undue distress no further action will be taken. Otherwise, a benefit penalty may be imposed.

Fraud

26. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he plans to take to reduce fraud in benefits. [99089]

Mr. Rooker: The Government published "Safeguarding Social Security", its strategy for combating fraud and reducing error on 23 March. This document is available on the Department's website.

Income Support (Pensioners)

27. **Mr. Grogan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement about the Government's policy towards increasing take-up of income support by pensioners. [99090]

Mr. Rooker: Research on why pensioners do not take up their entitlement to Income Support was published on 15 October. We will present our plans for the national programme in due course.

ONE Service

28. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the progress to date of the ONE service pilots. [99092]

Angela Eagle: The first four ONE service pilots, which were launched in June, are making good progress. We are already helping people plan ways to become independent, while ensuring that claims to benefit are dealt with promptly and accurately.

A further eight pilots are being launched today. Four will test the advantages of using call centre technology and the other four will be delivered in partnership with private and voluntary sector providers.

New Deal (Disabled People)

29. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the progress of the pilot scheme for the New Deal for the disabled as it affects Scarborough and Whitby. [99095]

Mr. Bayley: There are 12 Personal Adviser Service pilots within the New Deal for Disabled People. The North Yorkshire pilot, which includes my hon. Friend's constituency, is one of these and was the most recent to start. It has so far helped 24 disabled people into work, including 10 in the last month. Overall the New Deal for Disabled People has helped nearly 1,500 people into jobs.

Disabled People

30. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the effects of his reforms to the system of benefits for disabled people. [99097]

Mr. Bayley: We are modernising the welfare system to encourage work for those who can and provide security for those who cannot. Our reforms will help disabled people who want to work and ensure that extra support is given to those who need it most.

Benefits Agency Medical Service

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to review the Benefits Agency Medical Service. [99073]

Mr. Bayley: The Contract for the provision of medical services to the Benefits Agency was awarded to Sema Group from 1 September 1998 for five years. The service is managed and monitored on a daily basis by a dedicated Benefits Agency Contract Management Team. The service provided by Sema Group has not necessitated a review to be conducted and there are no plans currently for a review to be carried out.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the cost of imposing a threshold of £125 in relation to incapacity benefit. [99080]

Mr. Bayley: We estimate that setting a threshold of £125, below which no account would be taken of pension income, would increase benefit expenditure by £10 million in the first year, £45 million in the third year and £120 million after ten years.

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what motor mileage allowance rates his Department offers to *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* civil servants using their own vehicles for official business; and what has been the cost of each in each of the last five years. [98717]

Mr. Bayley: Information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Ministers, when travelling on official business, may use a private car instead of the official vehicle provided and claim mileage allowance on the same terms as civil servants in the Department.

Departmental motor mileage allowance rates

All cars (irrespective of engine capacity)	*Pence per mile*
Standard Rate	
Up to 4,000 miles per annum	40
Over 4,000 miles per annum	22.5
Public Transport Rate	22.5

Notes:

1. These rates were first introduced on 4 April 1997.
2. Information is not kept in a format which provides a breakdown of the components in the Department's overall spend on transport for the last five years.
3. Standard rate milage can only be claimed if it an be justified that the journey taken by private vehicle is in the public interest.

Benefit Payment Methods

Valerie Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assessment he has made of the accessibility to benefit recipients of *(a)* post offices and *(b)* banks; and if he will estimate the average distance from home in each case; [99270]

(2) what investigation the Benefits Agency has conducted of the effects of its decision to pay benefits through banks by 2003 on *(a)* benefit recipients, *(b)* banks and *(c)* post offices, with particular reference to smaller post offices; and what the results were; [99271]

(3) in his discussions with the banks about paying benefits through bank accounts, if the banks have agreed to *(a)* handle the cash necessary for all benefit recipients and *(b)* issue bank accounts to all benefit recipients. [99269]

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assurances he has received from the banking industry that, if new accounts were opened solely for the purpose of receipt of social security benefits, no charges would be levied for the withdrawal of cash; [99577]

(2) what assurances he has received from the banking industry that, in the event of all benefit payments being made into bank accounts from 2003, bank accounts would be available to all benefit recipients. [99570]

Mr. Rooker: No assessment of the accessibility of post offices or banks to benefit recipients has been made. Customers can choose to access their benefits in cash at both post offices and banks. We have no plans to change this.

We have decided to move to automated credit transfer (ACT) from 2003 as a modern, more secure and efficient method of paying benefits. People are increasingly choosing ACT as their preferred method of payment. The Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters Ltd. will be working together to build on this trend to ensure that, from 2003, ACT offers an attractive choice to benefit recipients, opening up access to a wider range of banking and other financial services, while continuing to offer access to cash at post office counters. The Performance and Innovation Unit will pay particular attention to this as part of their study into the post office network which was announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 21 October.

The Department will be arranging discussions with the banking industry on issues surrounding benefit recipients, charges and other matters in due course. We envisage there will be alternative arrangements for anyone who cannot open a bank account. We will ensure procedures are in place for payment of emergency payments where cash is required on day of decision.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to change the present system of benefits payments by requiring all recipients to receive payment by automated credit transfer. [99632]

Mr. Rooker: We are to move from the traditional paper based methods of payment to a more modern, secure and efficient way of paying benefits using the existing Automatic Credit Transfer (ACT) system to make benefit payments available through banks and the Post Office network. The new arrangements will begin in 2003 to be completed by 2005. Those benefit recipients who wish to collect their benefits in cash at post offices will continue to be able to do so.

Valerie Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the extent of fraud when benefits are paid *(a)* through bank accounts and *(b)* through post offices. [99268]

Mr. Rooker: The majority of payments through bank accounts relate to benefits such as Retirement Pension and Child Benefit. Few cases of fraud have been detected in these payments; however, the BA continues to work on identifying risks on dealing with them.

It is estimated that fraudulent losses from benefits paid through post offices were £19.4 million in respect of girocheques and £83.3 million in respect of order books.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what the results were of his trial of the use of a benefits payment card in respect of the level of benefit fraud; [99566]

(2) what assessment he has made of the extent of benefit fraud when payments are made by automated credit transfer. [99568]

Mr. Rooker: A pilot payment card exercise started in September 1996 in 12 post offices. The full trial took place from April 1997 to May 1999 in 204 post offices in the south-west and north-east areas of England. In total, 35,000 Child Benefit customers were issued with payment cards. No cases of benefit fraud were found.

Around 65 per cent. of all benefits are still paid to customers by order books and girocheques which are cashed at post offices. However, automated credit transfer (ACT) is becoming more prevalent and therefore, as the attendant risks increase, the Benefits Agency (BA) is working on identifying the nature of the fraud associated with this method of payment.

The majority of payments through bank accounts currently relate to benefits such as Retirement Pension and Child Benefit. Few cases of fraud have been detected in these payments.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the titles of official departmental reports he is preparing with a view to publication in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 2000, stating in each case the planned date of publication. [99627]

Mr. Rooker: The Department fully expects to publish the following documents in 1999–2000.

Social Security Departmental Report—The Government's Expenditure Plans 2000–01 and 2001–02

The 2nd Poverty Audit Report

The Chief Adjudication Officer's final report

The War Pensions Agency Business Plan 2000–01

The War Pensions Agency Annual Report and Accounts 1999–2000

The War Pensioners Report 1999–2000

The Information Technology Services Agency Annual Report and Accounts 1999–2000

The Benefits Agency Business Plan 2000–01

The Benefits Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2000–01

The Child Support Agency Annual Report 1999–2000

The Child Support Agency Business Plan 2000–01

As yet dates for these are unconfirmed. Publication dates will be determined by the progress of work, the requirements of Parliament and the efficient management of Government. Other reports may emerge during the course of the year.

Child Poverty

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much extra cash income would need to be received by low-income households in the latest year for which figures are available in order to ensure that all children are in households with at least half average income *(a)* as the half average is at present and *(b)* as half average income would be after the extra transfers. [99395]

Angela Eagle: Our strategy for eradicating child poverty within 20 years involves tackling the main causes of poverty and social exclusion. This means helping parents find work, making work pay and ensuring that every child gets the best possible start in life as well as providing additional help for families through the tax and benefit system.

Using information drawn from the 1997–98 Households Below Average Income data set, based on the 1997–98 Family Resources Survey; it is estimated that, on average, around £46 per week per household of additional income from earnings, benefit, or other source would have needed to have been received in 1997–98 to ensure that all children were in households with at least half average income before housing costs as it was before the transfers; and around £52 per week using the after housing costs measure.

The amount of additional income needed, as half average income would be after transfers depends on the proportion of the total additional income accounted for by transfers and how those transfers are funded.

Notes:

1. Figures given in April 1999 prices are rounded to the nearest pound. All figures are estimates and are taken from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data sets. The current series is based on the Family Resources Survey (FRS) and is available for the years 1994–95 to 1997–98 and covers Great Britain but not Northern Ireland. The figures presented will be subject to sampling error. Figures for children are sensitive to the choice of equivalence scale.

2. Estimates assume that each household receives exactly enough extra to reach half average income.

3. The estimates assume no change in working patterns after the transfers have been made.

4. Estimates based on reported current income, which is assumed to stay constant throughout the year. Estimates include some negative incomes (after tax and housing costs). Estimates exclude the self-employed. Income data at the bottom of the income distribution and for self-employed people are known to be an imperfect indicator of living standards. Estimates of the median gap, which are less affected by very low incomes at the bottom of the income distribution than the mean, are £36 per week (after housing costs) and £32 per week (before housing costs).

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the Government's policy of eliminating child poverty requires rates of social security benefits set above the official poverty line. [99569]

Mr. Bayley: We published the document "Opportunity for all" on 21 September (Cm 4445) which sets out our strategy for tackling the causes of poverty and social exclusion. The report includes a range of indicators against which we can monitor our progress in tackling these causes and overcoming the problems faced by people living in poverty. Further details on all the indicators in the report have been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Our strategy for eradicating child poverty within 20 years involves tackling the main causes of poverty and social exclusion, providing additional help for families with children through the tax and benefit systems and ensuring that every child gets the best possible start in life.

Capital Limits (Benefits)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the Government's review of the capital limits for *(a)* income support, *(b)* housing benefit and *(c)* council tax benefit will be concluded. [99445]

Angela Eagle: We announced in the Pensions Green Paper, "Partnership in Pensions", that we would examine ways to greater reward those who have made provision for their own retirement. Our proposals will be announced during this Parliament.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in what circumstances a female appellant against a disability living allowance rejection is permitted to ask for an all-female tribunal to hear her case; and if he will make a statement. [99549]

Angela Eagle: The allocation of members to a tribunal is a matter for the President of the Independent Tribunal Service, His Honour Judge Michael Harris. He will write to the right hon. Member.

Industrial Injuries Benefit

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the medical examination given to claimants of industrial injuries benefits. [100257]

Mr. Bayley: Decisions on claims for Industrial Injuries benefits are made by decision makers, taking into account the medical evidence provided by medical advisers trained in Disability Assessment Medicine. It is for the decision maker to judge whether the medical examination report is adequate for the purpose of deciding a claim. The on-going medical quality monitoring of the medical advisers' examination reports suggests that they are maintaining the same standards as pertained when the doctors were responsible for decision making. However following the introduction of lay decision making in July this year the quality of the medical report is further enhanced by a requirement that medical advisers give clear, unambiguous and jargon-free reasons for their opinion.

Asbestos-related Disease

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals he has to claim from asbestos manufacturers, suppliers and their insurance companies for the cost to the public purse of asbestos-related illness. [99575]

Mr. Bayley: The Industrial Injuries scheme provides benefits for employed earners disabled by asbestos-related illness arising out of and in the course of their employment. This benefit compensates people for a loss of faculty which results in disablement; it is not based on issues of 'fault'.

Under the provisions of the compensation recovery scheme, benefits paid as a result of asbestos-related illness can be recovered if the person suffering from the illness is awarded third party compensation. Benefits are recovered from the compensator from the date of claim to benefit in respect of the disease, subject to a five year maximum. The compensator may reduce the compensation payment to take account of this liability, but only where compensation and benefits are paid for the same need. Compensation for pain and suffering cannot be reduced.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations have been made to him about the adequacy of the diagnosis procedures for asbestos-related diseases for qualifying for social security benefits; and if he will make a statement. [99572]

Mr. Bayley: Representations have been received about individual claimants, which are of course confidential. We are not aware of any representations specifically about the adequacy of diagnostic procedures for these diseases.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what training is undergone by doctors serving his Department to enable them to distinguish between diseases having their origin in smoking and those having their origin in asbestos. [99574]

Mr. Bayley: Medical Services doctors receive a five day training course instructing them how to apply their medical knowledge to the legislative criteria. It includes considering the raw materials, radiological and pathological findings and clinical presentation. Each doctor is then assigned to a more experienced colleague who acts as a supervisory mentor until he or she is assessed as capable of working alone. Work is then audited regularly with quality assured processes to assess any need for further training, and the training is kept under constant review. Forms used to record medical assessments for respiratory prescribed diseases require the doctor to record details of the claimant's smoking habits.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if it is his policy that all those claiming a social security benefit on the grounds of suffering from an asbestos-related disease should have undergone a CT scan to improve diagnosis. [99573]

Mr. Bayley: It is not our policy that such Social Security benefit claimants should have undergone a CT scan.

CT scans involve considerable exposure to ionising radiation. It would be incompatible with EU and UK legislation on reducing radiation exposure to set any such requirement when it is possible to award benefit on the basis of other evidence of an acceptable nature, such as ordinary chest radiographs. It is important to note that the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council (which advises the Secretary of State on this benefit) recommended in 1996 that awards for bilateral diffuse pleural thickening should be based upon the chest radiograph rather than a CT scan.

War Pensions

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent discussions Ministers or his officials have held with the Ministry of Defence in respect of war pensions for widows; what was the outcome; and if he will make a statement. [100314]

Mr. Bayley: Officials of both Departments have been fully involved in the joint review of compensation for members of the Armed Forces who are disabled because of or whose death is due to service. Ministers and officials of both Departments also discussed the issues raised by the recent debates on war widows' pensions during the passage of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act.

Widow's Benefit

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what effect the removal of widow's benefit will have on the widow's eligibility for the basic state pension. [99075]

Mr. Rooker: We have ensured that, when the new Bereavement Benefits scheme is introduced, a widow on reaching pension age, who has not remarried, will receive Retirement Pension as if she had been receiving Widow's Pension up to pension age under the current scheme. This provision will, of course, like the Bereavement Benefits themselves be available equally to widows and widowers.

Winter Fuel Allowance

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the arrangements for the payment of the winter fuel allowance. [99098]

Mr. Rooker: For the third winter running, Winter Fuel Payments are being made to eligible pensioners. For the first time, payments this year will be made before Christmas. The issue of payments began on 8 November and should be completed by 3 December.

The payment has been increased to £100 for eligible pensioner households from this winter. Also, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security announced that the payments will be made every year from now on.

Pensioners (Benefits)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of pensioners entitled to receive the minimum income guarantee *(a)* in the current year and *(b)* in each of the next five years, assuming it is uprated by earnings each year. [99398]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Estimates of the average number of pensioners entitled to receive the minimum income guarantee in each year, 1999–2000 to 2001–02

Thousand

Income Support cases aged over 60	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Pensioner cases (excluding RA/RCNH)	1,390	1,380	1,350
Pensioner cases plus partners (excluding RA/RCNH)	1,640	1,620	1,580
Residential Allowance cases	170	180	180
RC/NH cases	50	40	30

Notes:

1. The partners of pensioner cases (excluding Residential Allowance (RA) and Residential Care and Nursing Home (RCNH) cases) may be under 60, but the majority will be over 60.

2. The figures are consistent with expenditure estimates published in the November 1999 Pre Budget Report for the years 1998–99 to 2001–02.

3. There are no published estimates for later years.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are entitled to means-tested benefit in 1999; and how many will be so entitled after the implementation of the increases in the basic state pension and the minimum income guarantee for pensions announced in his up-rating statement, when broken down between the different benefits. [99448]

Mr. Rooker: As at May 1998, the latest date for which information on all means-tested benefits is available, the estimated number of pensioners (aged 60 or over) who were entitled to means-tested benefit was 3.08 million. We estimate that a further 25,000 pensioners will become entitled to the minimum income guarantee from next April because of its link with earnings growth. 6,000 pensioners will become entitled to Housing Benefit and 9,000 will become entitled to Council Tax Benefit for the same reason.

Notes:

1. In this analysis, pensioners are defined as where the claimant or partner is aged 60 or over.

2. Means-tested benefits include Disability Working Allowance, Family Credit, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based), Council Tax Benefit and Housing.

3. Numbers refer to benefit units, which may be a single person or a couple.

4. Figures do not include second adult rebates.

5. Numbers are rounded to the nearest ten thousand.

Sources:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry (5 per cent. sample), May 1998 and May 1999.

Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry (5 per cent. sample), May 1998 and May 1999.

Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.

Disability Working Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry (100 per cent. sample), May 1998 and May 1999.

Housing Benefit Management Information System (1 per cent. sample), May 1998.

WALES

Special Advisers

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the number of special advisers working for the Secretary of State for Wales in each year from 1992–93. [100097]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Figures are not available for the financial year 1992–93. From that year they are as follows:

Date	*Number*
1993–94	1
1994–95	1
1995–96	1
1996–97	1
1997–98	2
1998–99	1
1999	
1 April to 30 June	3
1 July to 29 November	1

From the start of December this year I will employ two special advisers.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Lord Chancellor (Tenure of Office) (Amendment) Bill

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what discussions *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have had since 27 March 1998 concerning the Lord Chancellor (Tenure of Office) (Amendment) Bill [Lords] 1998; if he will make a statement on the statutory provisions concerning disbarment from holding the position of Lord Chancellor as it affects (i) Jews, (ii) Muslims, (iii) Buddhists and (iv) members of other non-Christian religions; and what steps he proposes to ensure there is no religious requirement in *(a)* holding the office of Lord Chancellor and *(b)* carrying out the functions of Lord Chancellor. [99810]

Jane Kennedy *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The Lord Chancellor and his officials have held preliminary discussions with the promoter of the Lord Chancellor (Tenure of Office) (Amendment) Bill, the noble Lord Alderdice, and his advisers. The purpose of the discussions is to consider how legislation could provide for alternative arrangements to be made in the event of a Lord Chancellor considering that it was not proper for him or her personally to exercise ecclesiastical functions attached to the office of Lord Chancellor. The discussion follows proposals made during the debates on the Bill which Lord Alderdice introduced last year.

I am not aware of any extant statutory provisions which would disbar any person from holding the office of Lord Chancellor on the ground of his or her religious persuasion.

The Government do not propose to take any steps to change any existing law which governs the holding of the office of Lord Chancellor, or the carrying out of the functions of that office. Traditionally, it has not been regarded as appropriate for the Government to introduce legislation intended to facilitate the holding or performance of such office by individuals of particular religious persuasions.

Magistrates Courts (Legal Aid)

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what would have been the hourly rate for legal aid work in magistrates courts had fees been raised annually in line with inflation, detailed by each year, in each of the last five years. [100470]

Mr. Lock: The majority of magistrates court criminal cases are paid for by a standard fee. Hourly rates are paid on non standard cases. Of cases receiving criminal legal aid, 9 per cent. are currently paid by non standard fees and account for 35 per cent. of expenditure. Although hourly rates have not increased during the period in question, the average amount paid in a case has increased from £1,554 to £1,649. Had the hourly rates increased in line with inflation, the rates would be as detailed.

£

	April 1996[1]	*January 1997*	*January 1998*	*January 1999*
Outside London				
Franchisees				
Preparation	46.00	47.29	48.85	50.02
Advocacy	57.75	59.37	61.33	62.80
Attendance at Court	31.50	32.38	33.45	34.25
Travelling and waiting	25.50	26.21	27.08	27.73
Routine letters and telephone calls	3.55	3.65	3.77	3.86
Non-Franchisees				
Preparation	44.75	46.00	47.52	48.66
Advocacy	56.50	58.08	60.00	61.44
Attendance at Court	30.50	31.35	32.39	33.17
Travelling and waiting	24.75	25.44	26.28	26.91
Routine letters and telephone calls	3.45	3.55	3.66	3.75
London area				
Franchisees				
Preparation	48.50	49.86	51.50	52.74
Advocacy	57.75	59.37	61.33	62.80
Attendance at Court	31.50	32.38	33.45	34.25
Travelling and waiting	25.50	26.21	27.08	27.73
Routine letters and telephone calls	3.70	3.80	3.93	4.02
Non-franchisees				
Preparation	47.25	48.57	50.18	51.38
Advocacy	56.50	58.08	60.00	61.44
Attendance at Court	30.50	31.35	32.39	33.17
Travelling and waiting	24.75	25.44	26.28	26.91
Routine letters and telephone calls	3.60	3.70	3.82	3.91

[1] Hourly rates for legal aid work in the Magistrates Courts were last raised in April 1996 and these are therefore the existing rates.

Judicial Appointments

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department of the judicial vacancies filled since May 1997 in the *(a)* House of Lords, *(b)* Court of Appeal, *(c)* High Court and *(d)* Circuit Bench, how many were filled by (i) women, (ii) people from ethnic minorities and (iii) solicitors. [100417]

Mr. Lock: The available information is as follows:

The figures for the number of appointments made since May 1997 and the further breakdown by gender, ethnic background and professional background are detailed in the table.

Full-time appointments made since May 1997, classified by gender, ethnic and professional background

Post	Appointments made	Number of females	Number of ethnic minority background	Solicitors
House of Lords	4	0	0	0
Court of Appeal	11	1	0	0
High Court	19	2	0	0
Circuit Bench	71	12	1	4

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many vacancies for judicial appointments there were in the *(a)* House of Lords, *(b)* Court of Appeal and *(c)* High Court in each of the last three years. [100418]

Mr. Lock: From the information available the number of vacancies for judicial appointments in the House of Lords, Court of Appeal and the High Court for the past three years is as follows:

	House of Lords	Court of Appeal	High Court
1996	2	2(3)	9
1997	2	5	7
1998	2	2	5(2)
1999	1	4	5(1)

Note:
The figures in brackets represent additional appointments. In 1996 there were three additional appointments to the Court of Appeal. In 1998 there were two additional appointments to the High Court and in 1999 there was one additional appointment to the High Court. These appointments were additional in that they did not arise from vacancies caused by promotion or retirement.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when Sir Leonard Peach was commissioned to conduct his inquiry into the procedures for appointing judges and QCs; by what date he was asked to report; and when the Lord Chancellor expects to receive the report. [100446]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor announced on 27 July 1999 that he had appointed Sir Leonard Peach to provide a report on the operation of the appointments procedures. At that time Sir Leonard expected to report during the last quarter of the year. The Lord Chancellor expects to receive the report soon and for it to be published before Christmas.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to advertise for candidates for the eight new vacancies on the High Court Bench approved on 23 November. [100414]

Mr. Lock: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor does not advertise vacancies on the High Court Bench on an individual basis. However, the Lord Chancellor has placed advertisements indicating that he welcomes applications from practitioners who wish to put themselves forward for appointment to the High Court Bench and continues to welcome such applications.

In the light of the statutory instrument passed in the House of Commons on 23 November, my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is considering if it is appropriate to place further advertisements in order to encourage suitably qualified and experienced Barristers and Solicitors to put themselves forward for appointment to the High Court.

"Paths to Justice"

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the research report, "Paths to Justice", published by the Nuffield Foundation, in respect of public confidence in the judiciary. [100445]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor and I are both very grateful to Professor Genn for undertaking the research in "Paths to Justice". The report reveals that the perception of judges is inconsistent with the true facts, as evidenced by the high level of satisfaction with judges which most court users report—a level of satisfaction which is remarkable, considering that in every court case there has to be a winner and a loser, and therefore a disappointed party. It is important that deserved public confidence in the judiciary is maintained.

Magistrates Courts (Costs)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the average cost per day of a trial in a Magistrates Court *(a)* at which a stipendiary magistrate presides and *(b)* before lay justices. [100315]

Jane Kennedy: The information requested is not yet available. The Government have commissioned research to assess the relative costs, effectiveness and other benefits/disadvantages of Stipendiary and lay magistrates, taking into account all related costs including those of other agencies.

HEALTH

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what motor mileage allowance rates his Department offers to *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* civil servants using their own vehicles for official business; and what has been the cost of each in each of the last five years. [98696]

Yvette Cooper: In the Department the current motor mileage allowance rates for Ministers and civil servants who use their own vehicles are 40 pence per mile for the first 4,000 miles in a financial year and 22.5 pence per mile for mileage in excess of 4,000 miles.

Ministers, when travelling on official business, may use a private car instead of an official car, and claim mileage allowance in the same circumstances and on the same terms as civil servants in the Department.

The cost of motor mileage allowance payments is available for each of the last three years only:

1996–97: £824,000

1997–98: £877,000

1998–99: £816,000

of which the following was paid to Ministers:

1996–97: £69

1997–98: £189

1998–99: £0

Alder Hey Children's Hospital

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will investigate claims that children's organs were removed following their deaths without informed parental consent, and retained by medical staff at Alder Hey Children's Hospital on Merseyside. [99402]

Mr. Denham: In October the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) announced he would be launching an investigation into the retention of organs, following inquiries by Alder Hey Hospital which had revealed that in a number of cases, other organs as well as hearts were retained from children who underwent post mortems. He asked the Chief Medical Officer to conduct an investigation to look into what happened not just at Alder Hey Hospital, but in the country generally and its implications for the National Health Service as a whole. This investigation is under way.

Nutrition

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what responsibility the Food Standards Agency will have for the health aspects of nutrition. [99282]

Yvette Cooper: The division of responsibilities for nutrition between the Food Standards Agency and Health departments is set out in chapter 5 of the White Paper "The Food Standards Agency: A Force for Change", copies of which are available in the Library.

The White paper states:

The Government propose that the agency will:

be responsible for monitoring and surveillance of the nutrient content of food and the nutrient content of the diet,

provide authoritative factual information about the nutrient content of individual foods and advice on the diet as a whole,

secure expert scientific advice on the relationship between diet, nutritional status and health to support the definition of a healthy diet and to inform policy from the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy (COMA)[1],

provide the definition of a balanced diet, based on COMA's[1] scientific advice, for subsequent use in health education material produced by other bodies,

where appropriate, propose legislation relating to nutritional aspects of food, including labelling and claims, dietary supplements sold as food, fortified foods and functional foods,

provide practical guidance in relation to nutritional aspects of the food chain, including production and catering,

commission food and diet research appropriate to the functions of the agency,

represent the United Kingdom in international negotiations on issues relating to nutritional aspects of food,

formulate policy and provide advice to Ministers on these issues.

The agency will share with Health departments responsibility for:

providing the joint secretariat to the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy (COMA)[1]. (COMA[1] will advise Health departments and the agency),

surveillance of the nutritional status of people,

defining the health education message on nutritional issues, taking account of both food and wider health issues,

policy formulation and advice to Ministers on these issues, for example in relation to Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation, and public health aspects of food fortification.

Health departments will retain responsibility for:

wider public health policy issues including conditions (such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, osteoporosis or obesity) where nutritional status is one of a number of risk factors,

consideration of vulnerable groups and inequalities issues,

health education on wider behavioural issues which may include but go beyond nutrition (such as smoking, drinking, physical activity),

all links with the NHS and health professionals, breastfeeding promotion in the NHS, clinical nutrition and dietetics including hospital catering and nutritional therapy,

dietary supplements which are controlled by the Medicines Act (through the Medicines Control Agency),

health surveillance of the population,

and international negotiations on health matters.

[1] The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) will be succeeding the current advisory Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy (COMA).

Mental Incapacity Bill

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if, in the proposed Mental Incapacity Bill for England and Wales, nutrition and hydration by artificial means will be defined as medication. [99267]

Yvette Cooper: As outlined in my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor's Policy Statement: "Making Decisions—The Government's proposals for making decisions on behalf of mentally incapacitated adults", we have no plans to enshrine such a definition in statute law.

ME/CFS

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on his policy on the treatment of ME/CFS in young people and the principle of parental consent to their removal from their home for such treatment; [99453]

(2) if he will make a statement on the provision of specific treatment centres for ME/CFS and on the system of inspection for the centres. [99452]

Mr. Denham: The causes of chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis are not fully understood, nor is there a generally agreed method of treatment. Treatment to relieve the wide variety of symptoms which patients can experience is, therefore, a matter for individual doctors to decide in consultation with their patients.

The National Health Service provides a considerable number of services to which people suffering from CFS/ME have access, and such patients are seen within a wide range of hospital specialities. The CFS/ME Working Group will produce guidance aimed at improving the quality of this care and treatment.

The Children's Group of the CFS/ME Working Group, which has been established to review management and practice in the field of CFS/ME with the aim of providing best practice guidance for professionals, patients and carers to improve the quality of care and treatment for people with CFS/ME, will, as the name suggests, focus on issues specific to children. This will include educational and social services issues as well as child specific research. It is also considering reviewing practice in paediatric clinics.

Consent of a young person who has reached the age of 16 to their own medical or surgical treatment is sufficient unless they are not competent to give valid consent, where the consent of a person with parental responsibility should be sought. Such power only extends until the person is 18. The refusal of treatment by a young person competent to give consent may be overridden by consent from a person with parental responsibility or the Courts, provided the treatment is in the young person's best interest. Where the young person is not competent to give consent and a person with parental responsibility refuses consent, the Courts can over-rule that refusal if to do so would be in the child's best interest.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what experiments are taking place on young patients suffering from ME/CFS; and if he will make a statement. [99450]

Mr. Denham: We are not aware of any experiments taking place on young patients with chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department is *(a)* undertaking and *(b)* funding into the causes of ME/CFS; and what assessment he has made of the prospects for the success of such research. [99449]

Mr. Denham: The Government fund health and medical research in a number of ways:

The Department funds research and development to support its work on policy development and evaluation in health and social care. The Department also manages the National Health Service research and development levy which is used to support research and development of relevance to the National Health Service in hospitals, general practice and other health care settings, and to fund the NHS research and development programme. In addition, the Medical Research Council (MRC)—which receives most of its income via grant-in-aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—funds medical research as part of the Government's funding of the science and engineering base.

The MRC has provided support for a Small Project Grant in the area of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, undertaken by Dr. R. K. Morriss at the University of Manchester, entitled "The role of noradrenaline in the neuropsychological pathogenesis on the chronic fatigue syndrome". The total amount awarded was £37,241 and the study was concluded this year.

The NHS research and development programme is supporting the following projects:

Chronic fatigue syndrome after acute Q fever: a follow-up study of the 1989 outbreak cohort—Birmingham Heartlands Hospital, Birmingham

Should general practitioners manage chronic fatigue syndrome?—University of Hull

Family focused cognitive behavioural therapy for adolescents with chronic fatigue syndrome—King's College School of Medicine, London

Project details of work directly funded by the Department or supported through the NHS R&D levy can be found on the National Research Register (NRR).

Chelation Therapy

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those health authorities that finance the use of chelation therapy for patients. [99232]

Yvette Cooper: Information is not held centrally on the funding of this therapy by health authorities. Chelation therapy may be used in the treatment of a variety of diseases and is available in various forms.

Embryos (Disposal)

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the current arrangements for disposing of embryos. [99265]

Yvette Cooper: Section 17 of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority Act 1990 provides that the person responsible in a licensed clinic must ensure that proper arrangements are made for the disposal of gametes or embryos that have been allowed to perish.

In its Code of Practice the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority provides that, where an embryo is no longer to be kept for treatment the centre should decide how it is allowed to perish and what is to happen to the perished material. The authority requires the procedure to be sensitively devised and described, and that it should be communicated to the people for whom the embryo was being stored if they so wish.

Carisolv Gel

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to make Carisolv gel available to NHS dental patients; and if he will make a statement. [99389]

Mr. Denham: Carisolv gel is available for use by dentists throughout the European Union and this includes its availability to National Health Service dental patients.

Pertussis Whole Cell Vaccine

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the large scale vaccine trials of the pertussis whole cell vaccine were carried out in Sweden and Germany; and if he will place a copy of the report of the trials in the Library. [99447]

Yvette Cooper: Large-scale clinical trials of acellular pertussis vaccines that include whole cell pertussis vaccines as a comparison group were conducted in Sweden between 1992 and 1996 and in Germany between 1991 and 1995. Findings from these clinical trials were published and the following references have been placed in the Library:

Gustafsson L et al. A controlled trial of two-component acellular, a five-component acellular and a whole cell pertussis vaccine. N. Engl J. Med 1996; 334:349–55.

Olin P et al. Randomised controlled trial of a two-component, three-component, and five-component acellular pertussis vaccines compared with whole-cell pertussis vaccine. Lancet 1997; 350: 1569–77.

Schmitt H-J et al. Efficacy of acellular pertussis vaccine in early childhood after household exposure. JAMA 1996; 275: 37–41.

Liese J.G. et al. Efficacy of a two-component acellular pertussis vaccine in infants. Pediatr Infect Dis J. 1997; 16: 1038–44.

Heininger U. et al. Comparative efficacy of the Ledele/Takeda acellular pertussis component DTP vaccine and Lederle whole-cell component DTP vaccine in German children after household exposure. Pediatrics 1998; 102: 546–553.

Cervical Screening

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will implement the recommendations of the NHS Health Technology report entitled "A Systematic Review of the Role of HPV Testing in the Cervical Screening Programme". [99750]

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the NHS Health Technology report, "A Systematic Review of the Role of HPV Testing in the Cervical Screening Programme". [99720]

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce testing for the human papilloma virus for the triage of borderline smears, as recommended by the NHS Health Technology report entitled "A Systematic Review of the Role of HPV Testing in the Cervical Screening Programme". [100185]

Yvette Cooper: An outline proposal on pilot studies using human papilloma viruses testing as triage for mild and borderline cervical smears, as recommended in the National Health Service Health Technology Assessment report, will be discussed at the National Screening Committee's meeting in Belfast on 8 December. The National Screening Committee will advise Ministers in light of these discussions.

ChildLine

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to make additional funding available to ChildLine; and if he will make a statement. [99581]

Mr. Hutton: We greatly value the service that ChildLine provides to children in trouble and in danger. We have committed substantial support to the core operation of ChildLine through a grant under Section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968, totalling £542,500 over the three financial years 1999/2000–2001/02. ChildLine have also been awarded a Section 64 Grant of £150,000 over the three financial years 1999/2000–2001/02 for their special helpline for children in care.

Epilepsy

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average expenditure is per patient on the treatment of epilepsy. [99764]

Mr. Hutton: The information is not available in the format requested. However, information is available on the cost of epilepsy drugs.

The number of prescription items and the net ingredient cost for drugs used for the treatment of epilepsy and dispensed in the community in England in 1998 (the latest date that this information is available) was 6.1 million and £74.9 million respectively. The net ingredient cost is the basic cost of a drug and does not take account of discounts, dispensing costs, fees or prescription charges income.

Health Authority Funding

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the health authorities in England, showing in each case *(a)* the amount of money to which they would be entitled in 1999–2000 if every health authority were paid at capitation, *(b)* the actual amount allocated in 1999–2000, *(c)* the amount of money by which each authority is either above or below capitation, and *(d)* the percentage of each health authority's allocation which that capitation underpayment or overpayment represents, ranked by the percentage figures in *(d)*. [99803]

Mr. Denham: The table shows, for 1999–2000, for each health authority: in column A, the amount to which they would be entitled if every health authority were paid at capitation, ie their weighted capitation target; in column B, the actual amount allocated; in column C, the amount by which each authority is above or below capitation, ie their distance from target; and in column D, the percentage distance from target.

Health authorities	*A Weighted capitation target (£000)*	*B Allocation (£000)*	*C Distance from target (£000)*	*D Distance from target (%)*
Avon	589,434	582,510	–6,924	–1.17
Barking and Havering	258,434	256,500	–1,934	–0.75
Barnet	204,463	209,057	4,594	2.25
Barnsley	160,844	156,058	–4,786	–2.98
Bedfordshire	324,996	312,569	–12,427	–3.82
Berkshire	446,620	431,001	–15,619	–3.50
Bexley and Greenwich	274,466	289,039	14,573	5.31
Birmingham	679,290	681,946	2,656	0.39
Bradford	317,304	311,762	–5,542	–1.75
Brent and Harrow	301,083	310,379	9,296	3.09
Bromley	184,106	183,609	–498	–0.27
Buckinghamshire	377,426	368,084	–9,343	–2.48
Bury and Rochdale	251,674	248,434	–3,241	–1.29
Calderdale and Kirklees	367,445	369,064	1,619	0.44

Health authorities	A Weighted capitation target (£000)	B Allocation (£000)	C Distance from target (£000)	D Distance from target (%)
Cambridge and Huntingdon[1]	236,369	233.706	−2,663	−1.13
Camden and Islington	313,103	320,052	6,949	2.22
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	309,707	316,160	6,454	2.08
County Durham	420,738	411,001	−9,737	−2.31
Coventry	208,065	200,882	−7,182	−3.45
Croydon	205,238	202,682	−2,556	−1.25
Doncaster	198,087	197,811	−276	−0.14
Dorset	436,860	446,631	9,771	2.24
Dudley	184,858	183,018	−1,840	−1.00
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	478,734	475,900	−2,835	−0.59
East and North Hertfordshire	292,156	290,037	−2,118	−0.73
East Kent	388,808	395,915	7,108	1.83
East Lancashire	352,280	349,892	−2,389	−0.68
East London and The City	514,149	490,031	−24,117	−4.69
East Norfolk[1]	376,838	380,037	3,198	0.85
East Riding	361,453	359,056	−2,397	−0.66
East Surrey	239,039	244,052	5,013	2.10
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	494,731	505,366	10,634	2.15
Enfield and Haringey	321,764	323,495	1,731	0.54
Gateshead and South Tyneside	256,652	254,698	−1,954	−0.76
Gloucestershire	322,184	334,591	12,408	3.85
Herefordshire	98,652	98,713	61	0.06
Hillingdon	153,696	154,353	658	0.43
Isle of Wight	86,064	92,390	6,326	7.35
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	314,256	286,339	−27,917	−8.88
Kingston and Richmond	203,787	208,380	4,593	2.25
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	574,882	571,315	−3,567	−0.62
Leeds	466,585	467,788	1,203	0.26
Leicestershire	530,776	517,310	−13,466	−2.54
Lincolnshire	392,462	394,990	2,528	0.64
Liverpool	341,971	349,120	7,149	2.09
Manchester	340,940	348,698	7,758	2.28
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	413,443	422,995	9,553	2.31
Morecambe Bay	197,059	205,730	8,671	4.40
Newcastle and North Tyneside	330,977	332,729	1,752	0.53
North and East Devon	295,287	300,720	5,434	1.84
North and Mid Hampshire	288,021	291,934	3,913	1.36
North Cheshire	198,024	201,585	3,561	1.80
North Cumbria	198,179	198,290	111	0.06
North Derbyshire	228,939	228,364	−575	−0.25
North Essex	507,041	503,561	−3,480	−0.69
North Nottinghamshire	239,324	236,475	−2,849	−1.19
North Staffordshire	311,809	303,653	−8,156	−2.62
North West Anglia[1]	255,274	250,526	−4,748	−1.86
North West Lancashire	322,992	321,635	−1,356	−0.42
North Yorkshire	436,615	434,879	−1,736	−0.40
Northamptonshire	321,398	326,245	4,847	1.51
Northumberland	196,339	196,014	−325	−0.17
Nottingham	400,526	390,375	−10,151	−2.53
Oxfordshire	337,381	327,812	−9,569	−2.84
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	331,271	330,353	−917	−0.28
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	283,560	296,944	13,384	4.72
Rotherham	160,241	159,162	−1,079	−0.67
Salford and Trafford	302,725	309,165	6,440	2.13
Sandwell	207,949	205,153	−2,795	−1.34
Sefton	190,041	192,028	1,987	1.05
Sheffield	360,678	366,097	5,419	1.50
Shropshire	248,555	247,650	−905	−0.36
Solihull	121,100	122,698	1,598	1.32
Somerset	287,231	290,097	2,866	1.00
South and West Devon	376,078	383,067	6,989	1.86
South Cheshire	403,528	405,696	2,168	0.54
South Derbyshire	347,813	340,745	−7,068	−2.03
South Essex	432,611	417,802	−14,809	−3.42
South Humber	192,513	199,138	6,625	3.44
South Lancashire	181,469	185,797	4,328	2.38
South Staffordshire	320,147	322,868	2,721	0.85
Southampton and South West Hampshire	327,461	327,774	312	0.10
St. Helens and Knowsley	237,420	236,408	−1,013	−0.43
Stockport	175,572	176,374	802	0.46
Suffolk	391,148	397,601	6,452	1.65

Health authorities	A Weighted capitation target (£000)	B Allocation (£000)	C Distance from target (£000)	D Distance from target (%)
Sunderland	202,063	200,533	−1,530	−0.76
Tees	372,959	369,278	−3,681	−0.99
Wakefield	210,413	211,183	771	0.37
Walsall	165,336	163,243	−2,093	−1.27
Warwickshire	285,805	293,422	7,616	2.66
West Hertfordshire	312,558	317,538	4,980	1.59
West Kent	559,299	562,935	3,636	0.65
West Pennine	302,185	297,286	−4,898	−1.62
West Surrey	362,469	371,000	8,531	2.35
West Sussex	470,645	467,090	−3,555	−0.76
Wigan and Bolton	385,390	373,322	−12,069	−3.13
Wiltshire	339,986	345,684	5,699	1.68
Wirral	221,847	226,212	4,365	1.97
Wolverhampton	162,577	160,226	−2,351	−1.45
Worcestershire	298,177	303,405	5,228	1.75

[1] Since the announcement of allocations for 1999–2000, North West Anglia Health Authority, East Norfolk Health Authority and Cambridge and Huntingdon Health Authority have merged into two new health authorities, Norfolk Health Authority and Cambridgeshire Health Authority. It is not possible to provide data on a comparable basis for the new health authorities.

Long-term Care

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to respond to the recommendations contained in the Royal Commission report on long-term care for the elderly; and if he will make a statement. [99723]

Mr. Hutton: We are carefully considering the Royal Commission's proposals, the divergences of view within the Royal Commission and the comments that have been made by various organisations and individuals. We will make an announcement in due course.

Mental Health Services

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the total spending on mental health services in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 1997 for each health authority area. [99887]

Mr. Hutton: Over £2,648 million in 1996–97 and over £2,925 million in 1998–99 was spent purchasing secondary healthcare on mental illness in England.

The table shows the breakdown for each health authority area.

Purchase of secondary healthcare—mental illness—England

£000

HA code/Health authority	1996–97	1998–99
QD8 Avon	45,732	49,507
QAP Barking and Havering	20,782	27,310
QAQ Barnet	18,332	20,922
QCG Barnsley	9,868	11,671
QA6 Bedfordshire	17,142	24,266
QA7 Berkshire	31,180	38,284
QAA Bexley and Greenwich	18,837	30,939
QD9 Birmingham	55,899	63,980
QDD Bradford	25,348	25,535
QAR Brent and Harrow	34,074	40,714
QAC Bromley	15,424	17,927
QA8 Buckinghamshire	29,543	29,755
QCT Bury and Rochdale	14,105	15,672
QDT Calderdale and Kirklees	26,317	26,578
QA9 Cambridge and Huntingdon	22,678	24,975
QAT Camden and Islington	47,735	59,732
QDV Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	25,894	27,260

Purchase of secondary healthcare—mental illness—England

£000

HA code/Health authority	1996–97	1998–99
QDE County Durham	36,169	33,968
QEA Coventry	16,216	16,571
QAD Croydon	17,322	21,682
QCK Doncaster	14,561	14,050
QDW Dorset	29,859	31,160
QEC Dudley	13,855	16,419
QAV Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	57,339	63,938
QEP East and North Hertfordshire	23,426	26,630
QAE East Kent	25,211	35,293
QCX East Lancashire	25,363	28,416
QAW East London and The City	60,430	60,879
QCA East Norfolk	32,286	32,591
QDF East Riding	29,141	22,877
QAK East Surrey	32,755	32,396
QAM East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	37,961	41,986
QA4 Enfield and Haringey	41,147	36,452
QDG Gateshead and South Tyneside	26,064	27,537
QDY Gloucestershire	23,874	25,628
QED Herefordshire	4,766	7,074
QA2 Hillingdon	11,132	10,672
QD4 Isle of Wight	7,541	6,898
QA3 Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	52,059	57,703
QAG Kingston and Richmond	20,793	20,917
QAH Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	79,400	106,945
QDH Leeds	42,230	41,662
QCL Leicestershire	48,737	54,561
QCM Lincolnshire	28,662	22,145
QC2 Liverpool	29,857	38,934
QC3 Manchester	37,596	39,867
QAJ Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	47,578	51,405
QC4 Morecambe Bay	21,666	23,041
QDJ Newcastle and North Tyneside	21,980	28,601
QDX North and East Devon	22,837	24,606
QD1 North and Mid Hampshire	23,290	26,116
QVC North Cheshire	22,507	25,305
QDK North Cumbria	17,797	19,202
QCH North Derbyshire	17,295	18,549
QAX North Essex	43,602	46,622
QCN North Nottinghamshire	29,508	14,302
QEH North Staffordshire	25,534	23,084
QCD North West Anglia	19,502	22,253
QCY North West Lancashire	26,560	29,419
QDR North Yorkshire	32,818	39,955
QCC Northamptonshire	26,562	33,001
QDM Northumberland	16,304	17,983
QCP Nottingham	38,028	43,942
QCE Oxfordshire	28,061	30,713
QD2 Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	28,771	32,186

Purchase of secondary healthcare—mental illness—England

£000

HA code/Health authority	1996–97	1998–99
QA5 Redbridge and Waltham Forest	34,854	39,271
QCQ Rotherham	10,517	11,039
QC6 Salford and Trafford	27,653	27,580
QEE Sandwell	12,563	14,748
QC7 Sefton	11,499	12,977
QCR Sheffield	32,545	33,983
QEF Shropshire	16,983	19,672
QEG Solihull	6,735	6,285
QD5 Somerset	22,452	25,431
QD6 South and West Devon	22,747	32,439
QCW South Cheshire	35,732	40,602
QCJ South Derbyshire	26,608	27,959
QAY South Essex	36,511	42,633
QDL South Humber	1,894	11,495
QC1 South Lancashire	8,325	12,918
QEJ South Staffordshire	22,563	24,191
QD3 Southampton and South West Hampshire	29,516	31,486
QC5 St. Helens and Knowsley	16,287	19,684
QC8 Stockport	11,021	12,777
QCF Suffolk	33,877	37,625
QDN Sunderland	24,536	20,375
QDP Tees	28,075	29,525
QDQ Wakefield	17,333	17,951
QEK Walsall	10,556	11,237
QEL Warwickshire	22,585	23,341
QEQ West Hertfordshire	22,889	26,836
QAF West Kent	37,857	46,498
QC9 West Pennine	22,807	26,867
QAL West Surrey	33,964	36,035
QAN West Sussex	40,767	42,875
QDA Wigan and Bolton	27,734	28,205
QD7 Wiltshire	27,888	29,471
QDC Wirral	11,480	13,161
QEM Wolverhampton	8,928	11,215
QEN Worcestershire	15,068	16,384
Total (England)	2,648,191	2,925,934

Notes:
1. Data for 1998–99 is provisional
2. These figures do not include primary care nor personal social services

Source:
Health Authority Annual Accounts 1996–97 and 1998–99

Primary Care

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress made on the setting up of *(a)* Primary Care Groups and *(b)* primary care trusts. [99869]

Mr. Denham: 481 Primary Care Groups have been successfully established. 83 per cent. have opted to take on a substantial commissioning role and are operating at level 2. PCGs have taken responsibility for £11 billion.

Hospital Bed Use

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the inquiry into the use of hospital beds to report. [99992]

Mr. Denham: The National Beds Inquiry is nearing completion. Its findings will be published in due course.

Bicester Community Hospital

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the future of Bicester Community Hospital. [100283]

Mr. Denham: As part of the modernisation of community services across Oxfordshire, a brand new 30 bed community hospital is to be built at Bicester. The new hospital will replace the current hospital with a much needed facility, with an additional 18 beds to meet the health care needs of the local community.

Waiting Times (West Sussex)

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people had been waiting for 12 weeks or more for a first appointment with a consultant in the West Sussex Health Authority Area on *(a)* 1 April and *(b)* 1 October. [100480]

Mr. Denham: The number of people waiting for 13 weeks or more for outpatient appointments in the West Sussex Health Authority area is contained in the table.

Patients waiting for 13 weeks or more for first outpatient appointment

Date	Number
31 March 1999	6,915
30 September 1999	8,350

Age Concern

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he will take to prevent ageism in the NHS, with particular reference to the recent representations made by Age Concern. [100198]

Mr. Hutton: We welcome the recent Age Concern report which highlights this important issue.

Discrimination of any kind, whether it is on the basis of age, race or gender, is completely unacceptable in the National Health Service. Treatment should rest entirely on clinical need. We are determined to provide older people with care that meets their needs—fast, efficient and sensitive. The provision of first class care on the NHS is a priority for this Government. That is why we are developing the National Service Framework (NSF) for Older People. This, for the first time, will set national standards for the care of older people, driving up the quality and reducing the variations of that care. The NSF will be published next year. The development of the NSF has involved many groups, including the patients and carers themselves. However, until the NSF is in place, we will continue to improve and modernise the services we provide. Thus last year we extended the annual immunisation programme for influenza to ensure that everyone aged 75 and over can have the 'flu vaccine free of charge. Over the next three years we will be expanding cataract services to increase the number of cataract operations from 170,000 a year currently to 250,000 a year—this will benefit thousands of older people. From 1 April this year all people aged 60 and over are entitled to free eye tests regardless of income or health status.

Child Protection

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to bring into force each of the provisions in the Protection of Children Act 1999; and if he will make a statement. [100300]

Mr. Hutton: As I confirmed during the passage of this Act, it is the Government's firm intention to implement the provisions of the Protection of Children Act as soon as possible.

We will be consulting widely on draft regulations in the new year, and will clarify the dates for implementation at that stage.

Postnatal Depression

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department is taking to ensure that all antenatal clinics have in place a procedure for identifying mothers at risk of postnatal depression. [100098]

Yvette Cooper: "The Report on Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths in the United Kingdom 1994–1996" recommended that the early identification of women at risk of postnatal mental illness or self harm should become part of routine practice. At the maternity booking stage, brief details should be taken about the presence or history of maternal psychiatric disorder, alcohol or substance abuse, severe social problems and previous self harm. Mechanisms should be in place to ensure effective psychiatric liaison as well as to provide appropriate support. The report's recommendations were widely circulated to health professionals in the National Health Service in November 1998.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list, by region, the number of psychiatric beds available in mother and baby units for the treatment of women suffering from postnatal depression; [100099]

(2) how many women were admitted to psychiatric hospitals and units as a result of postnatal depression by region, for each of the past five years: what proportion of those women were treated in *(a)* mother and baby units and *(b)* in general psychiatric wards. [100100]

Yvette Cooper: The information is not collected centrally in the form requested. However, there were an estimated 613 finished consultant episodes recorded with a primary diagnoses of puerperium (post natal depression occurring within six weeks of delivery) during 1996–97, the latest year for which information is available. A patient may, of course, have more than one episode of treatment during a year.

Children in Care

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he intends to take to improve the well-being of children in care. [99064]

Mr. Hutton: A major programme of action to improve services for children in the public care has been set out in the Government's Response to the Children's Safeguards Review: the launch of the three-year "Quality Protects" programme; and in the White Paper "Modernising Social Services". The "Quality Protects" programme set new national objectives to transform the management and delivery of children's social services. A special grant of £375 million over three years has been made available to support the changes.

The Government also believe that many young people living in and leaving care have not been getting a fair deal. The Children (Leaving Care) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 18 November, will change the system to give these young people the support they need and deserve in preparing for and leaving care.

TREASURY

South Korea

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to prevent IMF support for South Korea being used to subsidise South Korean shipyards; and if he will make a statement. [99844]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer my predecessor as Economic Secretary gave him on 1 March 1999, *Official Report*, column 807W. There is no evidence that IMF support has been used to subsidise the South Korean shipbuilding industry, and this year South Korea has made net repayments to the IMF.

The UK Government strongly support Korea's IMF programme, the benefits of which are now being felt as that country recovers from financial crisis. However, the Government fully acknowledge the necessity to monitor that the terms and conditions of the programme continue to be fully respected. This point was underlined by the Industry Council on 9 November in the context of a discussion of the European Commission's first monitoring report on the situation in the world shipbuilding market.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect of the introduction of the national minimum wage on inflation. [99633]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Monetary Policy Committee is charged with setting interest rates to ensure the Government's inflation target of 2.5 per cent. is met, and hence the introduction of a National Minimum Wage is not expected to have any material effect on inflation.

Duty Free Sales

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the abolition of duty free sales within the countries of the European Union on employment in the UK. [99607]

Mr. Timms: In introducing the legislative framework for the duty free successor regime, the Government promised a post-implementation review after six months. Early next year we will carry out a properly structured evaluation exercise to assess the impact on UK industry.

Income Drawdown and Annuities

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects the Inland Revenue to conclude its examination of income drawdown and annuities. [100022]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Inland Revenue has been conducting a review of the operation of income drawdown in personal pension schemes and an announcement will be made in due course if it is decided that any changes are required.

Incomes (North Staffordshire)

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average gross weekly income was in *(a)* the North Staffordshire travel-to-work area and *(b)* Stoke-on-Trent for the last year for which data are available. [99878]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. George Stevenson, dated 29 November 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on average gross weekly income for the North Staffordshire travel-to-work area (TTWA) and Stoke-on-Trent.

Estimates of average gross income data for North Staffordshire TTWA and for Stoke-on-Trent, as discrete areas, are not available. The lowest regional breakdown of household income data published by the ONS is for annual gross household income per head by county. The latest published figures are for 1995 and were published in Table 9 of the article *Regional Accounts 1995: part 2* in *Economic Trends no. 535, June 1998*. This publication is available in the House of Commons Library. Sub-regional estimates of household income in the future will be based on different geographies, owing largely to the reorganisation of local government throughout Great Britain. The first estimates on this basis will be published in the first half of 2000, and will include data for more recent years.

The county figures available relate to the income of the household sector, as defined for the purposes of national and regional accounts. In addition to private households, this includes charities, voluntary and other non-profit organisations, and quasi-corporations.

The published figures are normally presented in terms of total annual household income per head of population. The 1995 average household income per head estimate for the county of Staffordshire, converted to a weekly average, was £186.

Student Grants

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on the payment of national insurance contributions within the student grant system. [100038]

Dawn Primarolo: There is no liability for National Insurance contributions in respect of student grants. I am not aware that any representations have been received on this issue.

Transport (Revenue)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the fuel duty increases in table B9 of the Pre-Budget report make provision for hypothecated revenue for transport. [100498]

Mr. Timms: No. I refer the hon. Member to paragraph B17 of the Pre-Budget Report which explains the assumptions behind table B9.

Air Passenger Duty

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer of exempting the Highlands and Islands of Scotland from air passenger duty. [100305]

Mr. Timms: Customs' preliminary estimate of the cost of an exemption for flights from airports in the Scottish Highlands and Islands is under 5 million, but the precise figure would depend on the exact scope of any exemption. Customs are consulting on this and a final decision will be announced in the Budget.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer of exempting Inverness from air passenger duty. [100306]

Mr. Timms: It is not possible to break down a figure for Inverness with any assurance at this stage. Fuller data will be compiled as part of the consultation announced in the Pre-Budget Report.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what discussions he has had with the European Commission on exempting the Highlands and Islands of Scotland from air passenger duty; [100309]

(2) what discussions he has had with the European Commission on exempting the Highlands and Islands of Scotland from air passenger duty. [100308]

Mr. Timms: The European Commission has been informed that the Government are consulting on introducing an exemption for flights from the Scottish Highlands and Islands, as part of a package of measures to amend air passenger duty announced in the Pre-Budget Report.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 30 November 1999

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliamentary Estate

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee (1) if he will estimate construction expenditure on the Parliamentary Estate in each of the past five years; [100032]

(2) how much the refurbishment of the Parliamentary Estate has cost in each of the past five years; [100034]

(3) if he will estimate expenditure on Portcullis House *(a)* during the next year and *(b)* before the next comprehensive spending review; [100025]

(4) if he will provide a breakdown of expenditure on Portcullis House; [100024]

(5) if he will list the intended expenditure on the refurbishment of the Parliamentary Estate *(a)* during the next year and *(b)* before the next comprehensive spending review. [100026]

Sir Sydney Chapman: These are matters for the Director of Parliamentary Works; I have asked him to reply to the hon. Member.

PRIME MINISTER

EU Fundamental Rights Charter

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Prime Minister if he has appointed a representative to serve on the body to draft a European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights, as agreed at the European Council in Tampere; and what guidance he plans to issue to that person. [99444]

The Prime Minister: Lord Goldsmith will be my representative on the Charter drafting body. The Government's view is that the charter should make the fundamental rights which already exist, and which are applicable at Union level, more visible to the Union's citizens. It should take the form of a political statement, rather than a legal text to be incorporated into the Treaties.

Kosovo

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he has had with *(a)* France and *(b)* Russia on the operations of KFOR designed to protect the remaining Serb populations in Kosovo. [99436]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* NATO Allies and Russia discuss all aspects of KFOR operations on a regular basis and Kosovo was discussed at the Ministerial Anglo/French Summit on 25 November.

Protection of the Kosovo Serbs and other minorities is one of KFOR's top priorities, with around half of KFOR manpower currently involved in minority protection duties. Security for all communities remains our central objective.

DEFENCE

Mental Incapacitants

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the review of the information available on the chemical warfare mental incapacitants known as Agent 15. [100910]

Mr. Spellar: In accordance with the undertakings given by the then Secretary of State for Defence on 9 February 1998 and by my predecessor on 22 April 1998, a review of the research on glycollates (of which Agent 15 is an example) and related compounds carried out at CBD Porton Down has been completed. A copy of the unclassified summary of this review has been placed in the Library of the House. The report explains that Agent 15 has been used in animal studies at Porton Down, but not in any work involving humans. Research on related compounds (glycollates and benzilates) involving human volunteers found that all the observed effects of the compounds were resolved within four days.

A more extensive research programme involving human volunteers was undertaken at the time of the CBD research in the United States. Follow-up studies in 1980 led to the conclusion that subjects exposed to anticholinergic agents (glycollates) reported no differences in their current health status compared to control groups. However, the methods and the group sizes used were such that only large effects were likely to be uncovered.

There is no evidence that UK troops were exposed to Agent 15, nor that Iraq used Agent 15. There are therefore no plans for further research into this agent at this time.

Project Capital

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people are employed on Project Capital. [100286]

Mr. Spellar: Following roll-out and proving of the Departmental Financial Management System, Project Capital was formally closed in October 1999. Accounting, in-year management and Planning and budgeting—using the Capital systems—are now largely integrated with teams working on cash management systems.

Clyde Base

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what changes have been made as a result of the management review of the Clyde Base. [100287]

Mr. Spellar: Following a scoping study at the Clyde Base in 1997, Ministers decided to retain work in-house through a joint Management/Trades Union proposal to establish Neptune Services Direct, which is successfully delivering hotel and related services increasingly efficiently. In addition, a rationalisation programme was set in hand to optimise the use of resources and skills in the Engineering and Facilities Support departments.

These changes are still being implemented but, in producing a more effective and efficient organisation, some 161 service and 182 MOD civilian posts have been lost. Through a policy of employing casual staff and fixed term appointees, the civilianisation of some service posts, and the fact that a number of posts had been held vacant, the changes are being achieved without redundancies.

Departmental Land

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he has taken to ensure that his Department's land is not used by the US Government for purposes which breach international treaties signed by that Government. [99884]

Mr. Spellar: Her Majesty's Government retains legal possession of and control over all sites made available for use by the United States Visiting Forces. The interpretation of an international treaty is a matter for the parties to that treaty.

Kosovo

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what tests were applied to clear each target engaged by British forces according to international law during the Kosovo conflict from March to June. [98563]

Mr. Hoon: UK air operations were conducted in strict compliance with the requirements of international law, including the UK's obligations under international humanitarian law, and targeting decisions took the legal considerations fully into account.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the total replacement value of the ordnance expended by British forces during the Kosovo crisis to the end of August. [98566]

Mr. Hoon: The indicative cost of ordnance consumed during the period of offensive operations in Kosovo is some £45 million. This is an estimate, based on a set of average historical prices for the ordnance in question, and does not represent actual expenditure. Final decisions on the replenishment of ordnance consumed during the campaign have yet to be taken.

Chinook HC2

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date DRA Boscombe Down carried out electron-magnetic interference testing during the airworthiness proving trials on Chinook HC2; and if recommendations were made as a result of that testing. [100144]

Mr. Spellar: A full electron-magnetic interference assessment of the Chinook Mk2 was completed by Boscombe Down in January 1994. Recommendations were made concerning the introduction and use in flight of UHF on-board transmitters and walk-on equipment, and High Intensity Radio Transmission Avoidance Areas (HIRTA) within the UK.

AWE Aldermaston

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many full-time equivalent MOD police officers were employed at AWE Aldermaston in each month from November 1998 to November 1999. [100682]

Mr. Spellar: I am withholding this information in accordance with exemption 1 (a) (national security) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what guidance he has issued to the MOD police in respect of overtime worked by officers at AWE Aldermaston. [100686]

Mr. Spellar: No specific guidance has been issued to the MOD police at AWE Aldermaston in respect of overtime. It is force policy to minimise the use of overtime commensurate with meeting the operational requirement. All overtime working is voluntary.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the average number of days sickness leave taken among MOD police officers at AWE Aldermaston in each month from November 1998 to November 1999. [100685]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested is not collected in days, but rather in hours. The table records the average number of hours of sickness, per officer, per month at AWE Aldermaston.

Month	*Average number of sickness hours, per officer, per day*
November 1998	10.2
December 1998	9.6
January 1999	13.6
February 1999	10.4
March 1999	11.5
April 1999	10.4
May 1999	11.9
June 1999	12.5
July 1999	10.0
August 1999	10.5
September 1999	9.1
October 1999	11.6

Note:
The figures for November 1999 are not available at this time

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the average amount of overtime worked by MOD police officers at AWE Aldermaston in each month from November 1998 to November 1999. [100683]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested is shown in the table.

Month	*Overtime hours per officer/month*
November 1998	38.0
December 1998	30.2
January 1999	31.7
February 1999	32.4
March 1999	40.4
April 1999	39.4
May 1999	38.0
June 1999	42.4
July 1999	38.9
August 1999	39.4
September 1999	42.9
October 1999	31.7

Note:
The figures for November 1999 are not available at this time

NATO

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* all other NATO countries have exercised a national veto on proposed actions during a NATO operation since 1989. [99466]

Mr. Hoon: Decisions at NATO are taken by consensus. During operations and deployments, procedures allow national commanders to satisfy themselves that a proposed course of action complies with the basis on which the operation was approved, consulting national authorities as required. Neither the UK nor NATO maintains records of how many times these procedures have been used since 1989.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Post Offices

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the principal activities of his Department and its agencies which provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices and *(b)* other post offices; if he will assess whether the level of business generated in each case is likely to increase or decrease over the next five years; and which new areas of business for post offices are likely to be developed by his Department and its agencies over the same period. [99551]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department and its agencies have no functions which directly provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices or *(b)* other post offices. It is not likely that this situation will change in the future. However, we have significant business with both Royal Mail and Parcelforce, who provide the bulk of our mail collection and delivery services.

Digital Television

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what projections his Department has made of the number of households with digital television in 2006 *(a)* with a digital licence fee supplement as proposed by the Independent Review Panel into the future funding of the BBC and *(b)* without such a supplement. [100046]

Janet Anderson: We do not have these specific figures at present. However, DCMS commissioned an independent report from Nera in 1998, which suggested between 13.8 million and 18.5 million households would have digital capability by 2008. The potential impact of a digital licence supplement on take up of digital television is something we are considering in reaching our conclusions on the independent review panel's recommendations. As part of that process, we will look at all the available evidence on this issue.

Recognised Sports

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what sports are recognised by the Sports Councils within the United Kingdom. [100292]

Kate Hoey: The Sports Councils do not 'recognise' sports, but there are 112 sports that are eligible for funding and other support. These are:

Aikido, American Football, Angling, Archery, Arm Wrestling, Association Football, Athletics, Australian Rules Football, Badminton, Ballooning, Baseball, Basketball, Baton Twirling, Biathlon, Bicycle Polo, Billiards and Snooker, Bobsleigh, Boccia, Bowls, Boxing, Camogie, Canoeing, Caving, Chinese Martial Arts, Cricket, Croquet, Crossbow, Curling, Cycling, Disability Sport, Dragon Boat Racing, Equestrian, Fencing, Fives, Flying, Gaelic Football, Gliding, Golf, Gymnastics, Handball, Hang/Para Gliding, Highland Games, Hockey, Horse Racing, Hovering, Hurling, Ice Hockey, Ice Skating, Jet Skiing, Ju Jitsu, Judo, Kabaddi, Karate, Kendo, Korfball, Lacrosse, Lawn Tennis, Life Saving, Luge, Modern Pentathlon, Motor Cycling, Motor Sports, Mountaineering, Movement, Dance and Fitness, Netball, Orienteering, Parachuting, Pentaque, Polo, Pony Trekking, Pool, Quoits, Racketball, Rackets, Racquetball, Rambling, Real Tennis, Roller Hockey, Roller Skating, Rounders, Rowing, Rugby League, Rugby Union, Sailing, Sand/Land Yachting, Shinty, Shooting, Skateboarding, Skiing, Skipping, Snowboarding, Softball, Sombo Wrestling, Squash, Skater/Street Hockey, Sub-Aqua, Surf Life Saving, Surfing, Swimming, Table Tennis, Taekwondo, Tang Soo Do, Tenpin Bowling, Trampolining, Triathlon, Tug Of War, Unihoc, Volleyball, Water Skiing, Weightlifting, Wrestling, Yoga.

Lottery Funding

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what has been the amount of funding given by the National Lottery to disabled projects for disabled people in England and Wales during the last 12 months. [100443]

Kate Hoey: National Lottery projects are designed to benefit all sections of society, including people with disabilities. Since November 1998, around £280 million has been awarded to over 4,000 projects designed primarily to benefit people with disabilities.

Royal Opera House

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what Government financial grants have been made available to the Royal Opera House modernisation programme. [100441]

Mr. Alan Howarth: No grants have been made directly from Government to the Royal Opera House for its redevelopment. The Arts Council's National Lottery capital programme awarded the Royal Opera House £78.5 million for the restoration, refurbishment and extension of the Covent Garden site.

Departmental Estate

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his estimate is of the value of land, property and heritage assets *(a)* in Scotland, *(b)* in England and *(c)* in total (i) owned by or (ii) under the responsibility of his Department. [99827]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The Department is at present implementing resource accounting and values have been derived from audited accounting information. The first year of published resource accounts will be in respect of 1999–2000.

The Net Book Value of assets held by the Department as at the end of March 1999 was £40.398 million (including the Royal Parks Agency). This figure relates to land, property and heritage assets in England only as my Department does not hold any such assets in Scotland.

The Heritage Assets held by the Department are valued at nil. These assets include Trafalgar Square, Apsley House, part of Osborne House, Wellington Arch, Marble Arch and nine statues (and the Government Art Collection, which has some 11,500 items).

Bournemouth Sinfonietta

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for what reasons the Bournemouth Sinfonietta's funding has been ended. [100791]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Arts Council announced on 13 October its plans for giving the subsidised orchestras a fresh start backed by at least £10 million to enable them to move to a more flexible way of working and to enable them to have scope to offer a more imaginative repertoire to audiences. The Council made it clear at the time of the announcement that they would be in immediate discussions with Bournemouth about a new model for their work. Out of those discussions has come the decision by the Bournemouth Orchestra's Board to close the Sinfonietta as a regrettable preliminary to securing the long-term future for orchestral provision in the South and South-West.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Aid Board

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the Legal Aid Board's policy is on seeking possession of vacant properties when an outstanding debt to the Board is secured against the property. [100123]

Mr. Lock: The Legal Aid Board secures debts against property in a number of circumstances.

Where an assisted person wins his or her case but some costs are outstanding, section 16 of the Legal Aid Act 1988 allows the Board to recover them from the property that was in dispute, through the "statutory charge". Where the assisted person's home was in dispute, or the winnings in the case are to be used to purchase a home for the assisted person, enforcement can be postponed and the Board will register a charge against the home. In those circumstances the property in question is not vacant. Should it become vacant, the Board will expect the property to be sold and the statutory charge paid off immediately.

The other circumstances are: where the court has made a costs order in favour of an assisted person, and the Board is seeking costs from the other side; where the assisted person has failed to make the required contributions towards the cost of their legal aid; where a legal aid certificate has been revoked, in which case the full cost of the help given has to be repaid; and where an assisted person has been granted an emergency certificate but has not been given a full certificate. In all these circumstances the Board can secure debts owed to it on any property, including vacant property, and will be in the same position as any other secured creditor.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the average length of time between debts to the Legal Aid Board being secured against domestic property and being settled. [100124]

Mr. Lock: The information requested is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the value is of debts to the Legal Aid Board that are secured against *(a)* domestic property and *(b)* vacant domestic property. [100125]

Mr. Lock: The information requested is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. As at 31 March 1999, the principle value of all debts to the Legal Aid Board that are secured by way of the statutory charge was £206,792,000. The total value of other secured debts to the Board, in respect of liabilities such as unpaid contributions, costs owned under revoked certificates, or costs awards in favour of assisted persons, is not recorded centrally.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Housing Benefit

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what statistics are collected *(a)* nationally and *(b)* by region, on the time it takes to process housing benefit; [99865]

(2) which national organisation monitors and investigates performance in processing housing benefit claims within target periods. [99867]

Angela Eagle: The Audit Commission in England and Wales, and the Accounts Commission in Scotland, collect and publish data annually for all local authorities administering housing benefit. This includes data on the number of claims determined within 14 days. Data are also collected and monitored by this Department. The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate is responsible for reporting to the Secretary of State on the administration of housing benefit by local authorities.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to bring the housing benefit service within the Best Value Framework. [99868]

Angela Eagle: A comprehensive range of best value performance indicators for the delivery of housing benefit was included in the recent joint Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions and Audit Commission consultation exercise ("Performance Indicators for 2000–01"). Indicators will be finalised by the end of 1999 and will cover the key aspects of local authorities' performance in delivering housing benefit. We are committed to driving forward improvements in the benefit services authorities provide so that they are faster, more accurate and more secure while also achieving value for money and taking account of the views and needs of local people.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to introduce measures to reform housing benefit. [99011]

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the timetable for bringing forward his proposals for housing benefit reform. [99901]

Angela Eagle: We intend to publish a Housing Green Paper in due course. This will present proposals for housing benefit within the overall strategy for housing.

Students (Benefits)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what benefits are available to students who are *(a)* pregnant and *(b)* single mothers; [100121]

(2) what recent representations he has received on the incomes of students and their ineligibility to receive benefits; and if he will make a statement. [100036]

Angela Eagle: Most full time students are not eligible to claim income-related benefits—their primary source of financial support comes from the education system. However, certain students in vulnerable groups, for example lone parents or disabled students, can claim these benefits.

A full time student is not eligible to claim an income-related benefit on the grounds of her pregnancy. However, students who are also working and earning at least £66 a week may qualify for Statutory Maternity pay from her employer, or Maternity Allowance from the Benefits Agency.

If she or her partner were in receipt of Income Support, income based Jobseeker's Allowance, Working Families Tax Credit or the Disabled Person's Tax Credit she would be able to claim a Social Fund Maternity Grant payment.

During the last three months we have received a small number of letters concerning students, their incomes and benefits.

Departmental Estate

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what his estimate is of the value of land and property held by his core Department *(a)* in Scotland and *(b)* in total; [99820]

(2) what his estimate is of the value of land and property *(a)* in Scotland and *(b)* in total held by (i) the Benefits Agency (including freehold, leasehold and historical leasehold offices), (ii) the Child Support Agency, (iii) the War Pensions Agency, (iv) the IT Services Agency and (v) the Independent Statutory Bodies; and what is the total value of assets for each of these bodies. [99819]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* In early 1998 all of the Department's land and property throughout the UK, both freehold and leasehold, was transferred to the private sector under two separate Private Finance Initiative contracts. We now no longer own nor hold any land or property. Instead serviced office accommodation is purchased from our two private sector partners, Trillium and the Newcastle Estate Partnership.

Under the PRIME contract, assets related to the properties were transferred to Trillium. The Department, however, retains a relatively small amount of low value property related assets in the Newcastle Estate.

The total net book value of all fixed assets held by the Department's Executive Agencies at 31 March 1999 is as follows:

	£
Benefits Agency	34,220,000
Child Support Agency	7,327,000
War Pensions Agency	1,035,000
Information Technology Services Agency	25,153,000

For the Department's Independent Statutory Bodies, valuation information is being developed as part of the implementation of resource accounting. This information is currently being audited. The first set of resource accounts will be published in respect of 1999–2000.

Inter-departmental Group (Poverty and Social Exclusion)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how frequently the inter-departmental group that met to advise on the report from his Department, "Opportunity for All, Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion" (Cm 4455), will meet in future, with representatives of which Departments, under what terms of reference, and with what involvement of representatives of voluntary and community organisations. [100724]

Mr. Bayley: In preparing "Opportunity for All", our first annual report on its strategy for tackling poverty and social exclusion, all relevant Government Departments met frequently to discuss the report. We are currently considering the terms of reference and membership for the inter-departmental group that will steer the second report.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to allow people with severe and enduring mental illness, who have been discharged from hospital and whose circumstances remain unchanged, to claim Disability Living Allowance and severe disablement premium without having to complete any additional forms. [99877]

Mr. Bayley: Scope already exists for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) claimants discharged from hospital on a long-term or indefinite basis to have their benefit reinstated on a weekly basis, providing they notify the DLA unit of their discharge, and providing there is no change to their care and mobility needs. Reinstatement cannot however be automatic; much will depend on the circumstances of the individual case. For example, a person who has been discharged from hospital may have greater or lesser care needs than they had before they were admitted and this could alter the rate of benefit to which they are entitled.

We recognise the special problems that people with mental health problems face when dealing with the benefits system. We are currently looking at different ways of gathering information necessary to deal with claims for DLA that will place less reliance on lengthy

forms, allow more face to face contact with claimants, and develop a system which is more sensitive to the needs of individual disabled people. As part of this, we have been working with organisations representing people with mental health problems to address particular concerns about DLA periodic inquiries. Discussions have been constructive, and are being taken forward in a revised approach, which we believe should lead to an improved service for such people.

Invalid Carer's Allowance

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many recipients of invalid carer's allowance are estimated to have earnings per week of *(a)* 0-£10, *(b)* £10-£20, *(c)* £20-£30, *(d)* £30-£40 and *(e)* £40-£50; and how many carers who would otherwise be entitled to invalid carer's allowance are estimated to have earnings per week of (i) £50-£60, (ii) £60-£70, (iii) £70-£80, (iv) £80-£90 and (v) £90-£100 or earnings in other ranges for which estimates are available. [99921]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available.

Pension Scheme Trustee Boards

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to improve the representation of pensioners on the trustee boards of pension schemes. [99999]

Mr. Rooker: We believe that member trustees add value to pension schemes, and want to increase their coverage.

Our priority is to ensure that schemes have member-nominated trustees, and that members have a fair say in determining the arrangements for appointing them.

The consultation document, "Strengthening the Pensions Framework", which was issued in December 1998, made a number of proposals on member-nominated trustees, including a proposal that large mature schemes should be required to reserve a place on the trustee board for a pensioner member. Responses showed widespread support for the principle of member trustees, but concern about the practical implications of some of the proposals, including that for a reserved place for a pensioner member in large mature schemes.

In the light of the concerns, we set up a working group with the pensions industry and other representative bodies to review the proposals. A further consultation document with revised proposals was issued on 7 October 1999.

The changes we are proposing do not require schemes to have a pensioner trustee, but will ensure that pensioners are given a fair say in the procedures.

Responses to the revised proposals were mostly very encouraging, and we plan to legislate in the forthcoming child support, pensions and social security Bill.

Personal Pension Schemes

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to allow unmarried members of personal pension schemes to buy annuities where the rate is determined on the member's life only. [99891]

Mr. Rooker: All members of personal pension schemes are already able to choose to purchase a single life annuity with their entire fund, provided that the pension contains no element of protected rights.

Members of appropriate personal pension schemes, which consist wholly or partly of protected rights, are required to purchase a joint life annuity with the protected rights element of the accumulated fund which accrued before 6 April 1997. Unmarried members may use all of the rights accrued from 6 April 1997 to purchase a single life annuity.

We are considering whether a further change should be made to the legislation in respect of the requirement to purchase a joint life annuity for pre-6 April 1997 protected rights.

National Benefit Fraud Hotline

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have called the National Benefit Fraud Hotline in each of the 12 weeks for which he has the most recent data. [100694]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Numbers of people who have called the national benefit fraud hotline in the most recent 12 week period, 30 August-19 November 1999

Week commencing	*Calls answered*
30 August	2,311
6 September	2,902
13 September	2,669
20 September	2,619
27 September	2,470
4 October	2,371
11 October	2,445
18 October	2,336
25 October	2,139
1 November	2,749
8 November	3,060
15 November	4,367
Total	32,438

Note:
On occasion people call the hotline but ring off before the call has been answered. Over the 12 week period, 1,109 calls were lost in this way (3.3 per cent. of all calls made).

Child Support White Paper

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he intends to respond to the report of the Social Security Select Committee, the 1999 Child Support White Paper [HC 798]. [101124]

Angela Eagle: The Government's response to the Committee's report has been laid before Parliament today, Cm 4536.

WALES

Birth Certificates

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales for what purposes his Department and its executive agencies require a birth certificate to be provided by *(a)* employees, *(b)* contractors and those applying for employment and contracts and *(c)* other persons. [99332]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department requires those applying for employment to provide either a birth certificate, passport, or driving licence in order to prove identify. Contractors, potential contractors, and other persons are not required to provide their birth certificates.

HEALTH

Gender Reassignment Surgery

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice his Department issues to health authorities who have a blanket policy not to offer gender reassignment surgery on the National Health Service. [98632]

Mr. Denham: Our advice is that each case should be considered on its individual merits.

Alder Hey Hospital

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Chief Medical Officer's investigation into the post-mortem removal and retention of organs at children's hospitals, with particular reference to Alder Hey, will be completed; and if it will be made public. [98625]

Mr. Denham: The Chief Medical Officer's investigation will look at what has happened not only at the Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital (Alder Hey) but in the country generally and at the implications for the National Health Service. He hopes to complete his investigation by summer 2000 and will publish the results.

Nurses National Register

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce a minimum time ban for registered nurses struck off the national register held by the UK Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting. [98471]

Mr. Hutton: Decisions on the length of time before which a practitioner who has been removed from the register may reapply are a matter for the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting.

Emergency Services (Millennium Celebrations)

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the plans being made to cope with the expected extra demand placed on emergency services during the millennium celebrations. [99560]

Ms Stuart: Preparations for the millennium began well in advance. All National Health Service organisations, including Ambulance Trusts, were assessed as presenting no risk of material disruption to services due to the millennium bug. Ambulance services have detailed plans and robust contingency arrangements in place to cope with expected extra demand over this period.

Transplants (Waiting List)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in each health authority are awaiting *(a)* heart transplants and *(b)* other organ transplants; and if he will make a statement. [99763]

Mr. Denham: Copies of the information requested have been placed in the Library.

We are concerned about the shortage of organs for transplantation and that was why we launched the organ donor publicity campaign in October 1998, reinforced in February by a campaign targeting the south Asian community. We shall continue to build on these campaigns to encourage people to join the National Health Service organ donor register, to carry the donor card at all times and most importantly make their wishes known to their family and friends.

We shall be developing a further campaign to inform the medical profession about best practice in requesting organ donation.

Additionally, in line with the drive to improve the quality of care for all users of the NHS, we shall seek to ensure that best practice is adopted in all units involved in donation and transplantation. We shall also support best practice in live donation, which has increased significantly over the last few years.

Epilepsy

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what arrangements are in place in each health authority area to provide a specialised service to patients with epilepsy. [99759]

Mr. Hutton: The information is not available in the format requested. Regional specialised commissioning groups are accountable for ensuring that effective arrangements for commissioning specialised services are in place in each region, including those specialised services required for the treatment of complex epilepsy.

Under the present system it is, of course, for health authorities and primary care groups to plan and arrange the services available to people in their care. They are closest to the patients and best placed to respond sensitively to their needs.

The Clinical Standards Advisory Group (Epilepsy Committee) has undertaken a study to investigate standards of clinical care for, and access and availability of services to, patients with epilepsy. The aim of this research is to review the services that are currently available. We have recently received this report and are currently considering its conclusions and recommendations and the implications they have for epilepsy services and for the National Health Service as a whole. We hope to publish the report within the prescribed 90 days, together with the Government's response.

"Fit for the Future?"

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the research on which the consultation document, "Fit for the Future?", was based. [99850]

Mr. Hutton: Details of the reference material used by the Centre for Policy on Ageing (CPA) and the Advisory Group in formulating their proposals for national standards are set out in the consultation document, "Fit for the Future?", along with details of the CPA's consultation process and the membership of the Advisory Group.

Social Services (SSAs)

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the standard spending assessment for social services in each health authority area in *(a)* the last year for which figures are available and *(b)* 1997. [99913]

Mr. Hutton: Information on standard spending assessments by health authority area are not available. Details of the standard spending assessment for social services in each local authority in 2000–01, the latest year for which figures are available, and 1997–98, are given in the table.

Personal social services standard spending assessments 1997–98 and 2000–01

£ million

	PSS SSA	
	1997–98	*2000–01*
Inner London		
City of London	1.561	2.235
Camden	61.539	65.514
Greenwich	53.365	62.961
Hackney	75.700	75.201
Hammersmith and Fulham	46.983	49.839
Islington	61.641	67.978
Kensington and Chelsea	40.373	46.555
Lambeth	86.801	90.889
Lewisham	69.408	75.348
Southwark	73.657	85.608
Tower Hamlets	59.032	73.568
Wandsworth	66.987	73.669
Westminster	57.804	67.916
Total Inner London	754.851	837.281
Outer London		
Barking and Dagenham	30.899	42.402
Barnet	51.638	60.393
Bexley	27.410	36.592
Brent	57.553	60.340
Bromley	39.743	47.489
Croydon	51.948	59.903
Ealing	57.287	65.432
Enfield	43.305	54.127
Haringey	58.229	59.422
Harrow	30.748	37.674
Havering	28.742	36.345
Hillingdon	35.322	42.248
Hounslow	38.979	44.092
Kingston Upon Thames	19.135	22.461
Merton	28.333	34.075
Newham	60.752	66.500
Redbridge	35.115	43.807
Richmond Upon Thames	25.255	29.178
Sutton	25.415	30.160
Waltham Forest	48.411	56.133
Total Outer London	794.220	928.773
Total London Boroughs	1,549.071	1,766.054
Metropolitan Districts		
Barnsley	36.429	42.926
Birmingham	191.972	225.012
Bolton	40.229	49.321
Bradford	75.447	87.681
Bury	24.157	29.599
Calderdale	28.077	32.336
Coventry	43.305	57.366
Doncaster	42.686	51.369
Dudley	40.206	51.788
Gateshead	34.634	41.824
Kirklees	56.626	64.763

Personal social services standard spending assessments 1997–98 and 2000–01

£ million

	PSS SSA	
	1997–98	*2000–01*
Knowsley	25.670	37.973
Leeds	114.303	129.248
Liverpool	88.990	117.144
Manchester	97.719	110.582
Newcastle Upon Tyne	51.633	61.709
North Tyneside	32.743	39.622
Oldham	34.744	41.299
Rochdale	32.480	39.794
Rotherham	38.936	48.236
Salford	43.219	52.505
Sandwell	52.882	65.532
Sefton	43.411	56.079
Sheffield	95.829	111.761
Solihull	22.140	29.077
South Tyneside	28.062	35.478
St. Helen	25.361	34.018
Stockport	34.842	45.480
Sunderland	49.391	60.395
Tameside	33.526	41.735
Trafford	30.056	35.724
Wakefield	45.645	56.499
Walsall	43.629	51.672
Wigan	42.069	54.070
Wirral	50.170	64.099
Wolverhampton	40.783	51.322
Total Districts	1,812.001	2,205.040
Shire Counties		
Bedfordshire	42.201	49.329
Berkshire[1]	91.439	n/a
Buckinghamshire	50.856	57.694
Cambridgeshire[1]	82.510	71.051
Cheshire[1]	117.590	93.808
Cornwall	66.035	80.833
Cumbria	62.999	77.302
Derbyshire	93.704	113.478
Devon[1]	150.872	107.139
Dorset	49.460	58.202
Durham	79.015	93.748
East Sussex	76.306	86.702
Essex[1]	206.992	196.593
Gloucestershire	66.678	78.881
Hampshire	137.052	153.061
Hereford and Worcester[1]	84.392	n/a
Hertfordshire	134.650	154.619
Kent[1]	208.470	207.259
Lancashire[1]	200.097	182.804
Leicestershire	59.501	72.569
Lincolnshire	80.602	91.628
Norfolk	105.747	121.769
North Yorkshire	70.297	75.996
Northamptonshire	71.409	85.391
Northumberland	43.653	48.531
Nottinghamshire[1]	146.546	110.286
Oxfordshire	70.860	78.168
Shropshire[1]	52.074	40.695
Somerset	62.493	72.150
Staffordshire	91.191	109.971
Suffolk	83.259	97.914
Surrey	130.363	143.522
Warwickshire	57.743	70.602
West Sussex	102.060	112.675
Wiltshire	48.547	53.766
Worcestershire	n/a	74.424
Total Counties	3,277.661	3,322.562

Personal social services standard spending assessments 1997–98 and 2000–01

£ million

	PSS SSA	
	1997–98	2000–01
Shire Unitary Authorities		
Isles of Scilly	0.282	0.249
Isle of Wight	18.798	23.070
Bath and North East Somerset	21.229	24.671
Blackburn	n/a	26.184
Blackpool	n/a	31.264
Bournemouth	29.672	32.681
Bracknell Forest	n/a	14.130
Brighton and Hove	47.223	52.088
Bristol	63.766	74.797
Darlington	14.800	17.272
Derby	35.075	41.732
East Riding of Yorkshire	35.546	42.357
Halton	n/a	22.517
Hartlepool	14.219	17.661
Herefordshire	n/a	24.383
Kingston upon Hull	49.478	57.422
Leicester	54.311	59.978
Luton	23.984	29.898
Medway Town	n/a	33.434
Middlesbrough	24.171	29.166
Milton Keynes	22.638	27.961
North East Lincolnshire	21.940	26.857
North Lincolnshire	19.306	23.024
North Somerset	23.346	27.391
Nottingham	n/a	62.419
Peterbrough	n/a	24.682
Plymouth	n/a	44.878
Poole	17.612	22.060
Portsmouth	31.254	35.662
Reading	n/a	23.110
Redcar and Cleveland	21.095	24.851
Rutland	3.377	3.702
Slough	n/a	21.683
South Gloucestershire	21.661	27.605
Southampton	35.513	40.959
Southend-on-Sea	n/a	34.311
Stockton-on-Tees	23.313	29.341
Stoke-on-Trent	38.102	49.075
Telford and the Wrekin	n/a	23.335
Thamesdown	20.113	24.565
Thurrock	n/a	22.689
Torbay	n/a	26.333
Warrington	n/a	27.880
West Berkshire	n/a	15.583
Windsor and Maidenhead	n/a	17.636
Wokingham	n/a	12.170
York	21.562	25.031
Total Unitaries	753.385	1,399.745
Total Shire Areas	4,031.046	4,722.307
Total England	7,392.117	8,693.400

[1] These shire counties were reorganised on 1 April 1998 and therefore figures for the two years are not comparable

National Care Homes

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he proposes to announce his response to the Consultation Document on National Care Homes Standards. [99989]

Mr. Hutton: The consultation document "Fit for the Future?—National Required Standards for Residential and Nursing Homes for Older People" was issued for formal consultation nationally on 8 September. The consultation period ends on 21 January 2000.

We will carefully consider all the comments we receive before finalising any regulatory standards and the arrangements for implementing them.

Physiotherapy

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many physiotherapist posts are unfilled in the NHS at the latest date for which figures are available; and how many physiotherapists *(a)* left and *(b)* joined the NHS during the latest full year for which figures are available. [99995]

Mr. Denham: The available information is given in the tables. The Department's Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies survey collected data on the numbers of unfilled posts in NHS trusts in England as a 31 March 1999. Information is not collected centrally on the numbers of physiotherapists joining and leaving the NHS, but the annual non-medical workforce census gives total numbers of physiotherapists at 30 September each year.

Physiotherapist vacancies in NHS trusts in England at 31 March 1999

	Total vacancies (whole time equivalents)
Physiotherapists	990

Source:
Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey March 1999

NHS hospital and community health services physiotherapists in England at 30 September each year

	Headcount
1997	18,180
1998	18,530

Note:
Figures are rounded to the nearest ten
Source:
Department of Health non-medical workforce census

Pharmaceutical Packaging

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what impact the EU directive on pharmaceutical packaging, which came into force on 1 January, has had on the availability and cost of generic drugs to the NHS. [99994]

Ms Stuart: Although it does not require them to do so, many manufacturers of generic medicines have decided in the light of European Community Directive 92/27, and other considerations, to change their production from bulk supplies to patient packs. It is likely that this change has contributed to recent problems in the availability of generic medicines and their increasing cost to the NHS. It is, however, only one factor and not, in our view, the most significant.

NHS Magazine

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the cost to public funds in the last year for which information is available of publishing NHS Magazine. [99894]

Mr. Denham: NHS Magazine was first published in June 1995. The net cost of publishing four issues of NHS Magazine in 1998 was £161,311.48. This averages a cost of £1.04 per copy.

Health Care Spending

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the Government have a long-term target figure for the percentage of gross domestic product that it wishes to see devoted to health care spending. [100006]

Mr. Denham: No.

Patients Association

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funding his Department has provided to the Patients Association in each of the last five years. [99990]

Ms Stuart: The main source of Departmental funding for voluntary organisations is the Section 64 General Scheme of Grants. Over the last five years the Patients Association has received the following Section 64 funding:

	£
1995–96	14,000
1996–97	6,000
1997–98	25,000
1998–99	20,000
1999–2000	15,000

NHS Consultants

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of serving NHS consultants intending to retire *(a)* before the age of 65 years and *(b)* before reaching the age of 60 years. [99888]

Mr. Denham: Information about the number of consultants in the National Health Service intending to retire is not collected centrally. For workforce planning purposes, we use data provided by the Medical Royal Colleges, where available.

A and E Waiting Times

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to establish a task force to monitor the number of patients who wait on trolleys for treatment in A and E departments. [99998]

Ms Stuart: Earlier this year we announced a £115 million programme to modernise, expand and update accident and emergency departments. At the same time we announced that we were setting up a team to spearhead improvements in services and to set standards of care in accident and emergency departments, including the care provided for people awaiting admission to hospital. The team is led by Mr. Mike Lambert, an experienced accident and emergency consultant, and draws upon the expertise of professionals in all relevant fields. Their report will be presented to Ministers next spring.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the *(a)* effect to date and *(b)* likely effect during the remainder of the current financial year of primary care group budget overspends on the prescribing patterns of those primary care groups. [99991]

Mr. Denham: Current pressures do not justify a reduction or withdrawal of services to patients. Primary Care Groups should monitor all aspects of their prescribing and continue their efforts to reduce wasteful and inappropriate prescribing.

Hospital Waiting Times

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people are waiting for *(a)* 12, *(b)* 18 and *(c)* 24 months for hospital treatment; and how many people were waiting for hospital treatment on 1 March in each year from 1990 to 1999 in the North Staffordshire Hospital Trust area. [99881]

Mr. Denham: The following table contains data for 31 March figures each year. Data are only available from March 1994 for North Staffordshire Hospital Trust as it exists today. However, the table supplies data for North Staffordshire District Health Authority before this time. Please note that this information will not be directly comparable with later years as it may not cover exactly the same area as the current trust.

	Total	*12 months plus*	*18 months plus*	*24 months plus*
31 March 1999	7,051	519	0	0
31 March 1998	9,877	392	0	0
31 March 1997	6,988	93	0	0
31 March 1996	7,307	0	0	0
31 March 1995	8,486	8	0	0
31 March 1994	9,170	0	0	0
31 March 1993	8,206	3	0	0
31 March 1992	7,254	251		5
31 March 1991	8,026	952		565
31 March 1990	10,019	1,170		1,282

Voluntary Organisations

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the voluntary organisations which received section 64 financial support in 1998–99 and 1999–2000, indicating the amount of each award and the number of years each organisation has been funded through section 64. [100495]

Mr. Hutton: The available information has been placed in the Library.

Dental Services

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many vacant posts there are for Community Dental Service dentists; [100501]

(2) how many dentists have been employed in the Community Dental Service over each of the last five years; [100500]

(3) what was the budget for the Community Dental Service for each of the past five years. [100502]

Mr. Hutton: There is no overall community dental service (CDS) budget. The level of investment in the CDS is a matter for individual health authorities to decide in the light of local need and priorities. Funding comes from health authority baseline allocations. Information about spending on CDS, recruitment and vacancies are matters for health authorities and data are not collected centrally. Overall CDS workforce statistics are given in the table.

Staff in the community dental service (England): all figures as at 30 September

Year	Head count				Whole time equiv. (wte)
	Full-time	Part-time	Honorary	Total	
1994	740	560	0	1,300	1,030
1995	760	560	—	1,320	1,040
1996	750	630	0	1,380	1,060
1997	740	630	—	1,380	1,090
1998	690	690	0	1,380	1,030

Note:
All figures are rounded to nearest 10

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health where the new dental phone-and-go schemes will be based. [100503]

Mr. Hutton: Two phone-and-go dental access centres have already opened in Cornwall and Shropshire. A further six will begin to open from the autumn in Wolverhampton, Bromley, Gloucester, Swindon, Worcester, and Manchester. Expressions of interest for further dental access centres are currently being considered and an announcement will be made shortly. Those that are successful will be given financial support to help them work up a full business case.

New Variant CJD

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have died of new variant CJD in each month since 1 May 1997. [99467]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is given in the table:

Year and month	Number of deaths
1997	
May	2
June	1
July	1
August	0
September	0
October	1
November	0
December	1
1998	
January	1
February	0
March	1
April	1
May	1
June	0
July	0
August	2
September	0
October	5
November	3
December	3
1999	
January	1
February	3
March	0
April	0
May	0
June	0
July	1
August	2
September	1

Barnet General Hospital

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when phase 1B of the redevelopment of Barnet General Hospital will be open. [100217]

Mr. Denham: Work on Phase 1B development at Barnet Hospital is progressing well. The private finance initiative agreement states that construction work should be completed within 38 months of its signing, that is, by April 2002.

Health Trusts (Fundraising)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the advice he gave to health trusts on fundraising activities, indicating what controls he has put in place. [100138]

Mr. Denham: The Charity Commission, as the regulator of charities, is responsible for issuing guidance to trustees, including National Health Service trustees. It has issued specific guidance to NHS bodies in the form of a manual, "NHS Charities a Guide" which provides advice on fundraising.

Electro-convulsive Treatment

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish his Department's latest advice on electro-convulsive treatment. [100797]

Mr. Hutton: The Royal College of Psychiatrists has issued guidance on the use of electro-convulsive therapy. A joint letter from the Chief Medical Officer and the President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in September 1998 was sent to all consultant psychiatrists, health authorities and NHS trusts indicating that it was expected that clinical governance arrangements would ensure compliance with this guidance in ECT clinics.

ECT is an effective treatment particularly for patients with very severe generally psychotic depression which is life threatening if left untreated. People who are this severely depressed may refuse or be unable to eat and drink, with a consequent high mortality, as well as being at very high risk of suicide. ECT produces a faster onset of therapeutic action in such cases than is the case with drug treatment.

ECT also has a more limited place in the treatment of other disorders such as mania and schizophrenia. Its role in these latter conditions is generally when drug treatments have proved ineffective or for some reason inadvisable.

Non-moulded Hearing Aids

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what rules cover the sale of non-moulded hearing aids in retail outlets. [98619]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 19 November 1999]:* I have been asked to reply as the Minister responsible for the Hearing Aid Council Act 1968, which regulates the supply of hearing aids, whether moulded or non-moulded. The Act requires that the dispensers of hearing aids must be registered as such with the Hearing Aid Council in order to supply hearing aids. The standard of competence for registration of dispensers is contained in the Hearing Aid Council's Code of Practice, copies of which will be placed shortly in the Library of the House.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Magistrates

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who has awarded the contract to conduct the research into stipendiary and lay magistrates by the Lord Chancellor's Department. [101120]

Mr. Straw: A contract was signed on 22 November on behalf of Professor Rod Morgan of the University of Bristol, who will lead a team consisting of colleagues in the Faculty of Law at the University of Bristol, researchers from Taylor Nelson Sofres (covering the fieldwork), and CRG Consultants (for the cost-benefit analysis).

The team will undertake research commissioned jointly by the Hone Office and the Lord Chancellor's Department, to assess the relative costs, effectiveness and other benefits or disadvantages of stipendiary and lay magistrates, taking into account all related costs including those of other agencies. It will be used to assess whether the current balance between the use of lay magistrates and stipendiaries is satisfactory; whether each set of magistrates is deployed in the most effective way; and the weight of arguments that are heard for and against the use of lay and stipendiary magistrates in particular circumstances.

The research is due to be completed in September 2000. The report will be published.

Policing Objectives

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what objectives he will be determining for policing in 2000–01. [101121]

Mr. Straw: The Police Act 1996 allows me to set objectives, or ministerial priorities, for policing. The objectives for 2000–01 are:

to reduce local problems of crime and disorder in partnership with local authorities, other local agencies and the public; and

to increase trust and confidence in policing among minority ethnic communities.

I have reduced the number of priorities from four to two as I believe this helps focus attention on two key areas of policing—reducing crime and rising to the challenges of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the achievements of staff in the immigration and nationality directorate over the past year. [101122]

Mrs. Roche: Staff in the immigration and nationality directorate (IND)—both at the ports and at headquarters—have faced greatly increased workloads during 1999 as a result of the large increase in the number of asylum applicants. Much has been achieved, but much more remains to be done and staff will face a continuing challenge next year. In addition, staff are now taking on new responsibilities to make asylum procedures operate more effectively.

I have, therefore, authorised a special payment of £150 for all staff, except members of the IND board. This recognises the extra duties and responsibilities of IND staff in this period of change.

Road Rage

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many attacks by motorists against other motorists have been reported during 1999; how many people have been charged as a result of such reports; and how many such people have been *(a)* sent to prison, *(b)* fined and *(c)* acquitted. [99527]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Incapacitant Sprays

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions incapacitant sprays have been used in each month in each Metropolitan Police division in the past 12 months; and what records are maintained of each use of the spray. [99601]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner has provided the following information on the use of CS spray by borough operational command units (OCUs) for each quarter of the last 12 months.

	1998	1999		
Borough OCU	*4th Qtr*	*1st Qtr*	*2nd Qtr*	*3rd Qtr*
City of Westminster	4	8	1	3
Hammersmith and Fulham	8	0	5	1
Kensington and Chelsea	0	3	2	1
Barking and Dagenham	5	0	5	3
Barnet	0	5	2	3
Brent	5	5	8	5
Camden	6	2	6	3
Ealing	9	8	6	9
Enfield	1	0	1	0
Hackney	2	4	2	2
Haringey	2	3	3	2
Harrow	3	4	2	5
Havering	3	2	6	7
Hillingdon	8	6	5	9
Islington	5	1	0	1
Newham	5	3	3	3
Redbridge	2	4	2	0
Tower Hamlets	3	3	4	1
Waltham Forest	2	5	5	1
Bexley	1	2	0	1
Bromley	5	4	3	2
Croydon	2	3	5	6
Greenwich	5	8	5	8
Hounslow	5	2	2	5

Borough OCU	1998 4th Qtr	1999 1st Qtr	1999 2nd Qtr	1999 3rd Qtr
Kingston upon Thames	6	4	3	5
Lambeth	6	4	7	11
Lewisham	6	4	3	13
Merton	6	0	3	2
Richmond upon Thames	0	1	1	3
Southwark	7	5	6	7
Spelthorne	1	1	2	0
Sutton	4	6	4	11
Wandsworth	0	2	2	2
Totals	127	112	114	135

The Commissioner tells me that a monthly breakdown for each borough OCU is not readily available.

Reasons for, and the circumstances of, each use of CS spray are recorded in the arresting officer's notes; if no arrest is made, a local record is kept. Each time CS spray is used, details are copied to the relevant Metropolitan Police policy branch and, in many cases, to OCU and area senior management.

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what rules, guidelines or other instructions are given to officers of the Metropolitan Police concerning the circumstances in which they may use incapacitant sprays; and what precautions officers must take to avoid danger to *(a)* members of the public, *(b)* the person being targeted and *(c)* fellow officers. [99602]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner tells me that training in the use of CS spray for his officers is based on principles contained in the Association of Chief Police Officers guidelines on police use of incapacitant spray.

Metropolitan Police officers are taught that CS spray is a tactical option when the use of force is justified, but it must be used lawfully. Where any use of force is contemplated, officers are trained to take full account of the circumstances and any likely dangers before deciding which tactical option to use. Their training explains the effects of CS spray on the person being sprayed and on others; they are also trained in aftercare procedures for persons sprayed. Custody officers have specific guidance on how to deal with those arrested following the use of CS spray.

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints have been received in the last year concerning the use of incapacitant sprays by the Metropolitan Police; on how many occasions disciplinary action has been taken against officers for misuse or other incidents involving an incapacitant spray; how many officers charged with such an offence were disciplined; and what sanctions were applied. [99603]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner tells me that between 1 November 1998 and 31 October 1999 there were 38 public complaints by members of the public concerning the use of incapacitant sprays. These complaints involved 41 specific allegations. Of these, 16 have been investigated and found to be unsubstantiated. The remaining 25 allegations are still being investigated.

No disciplinary action relating to the use of CS spray has been taken against any Metropolitan Police officer during the same 12-month period.

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date divisions of the Metropolitan police were issued with incapacitant spray; what type of spray is available to them; how many canisters have been purchased and at what cost; how many officers have been trained in the use of spray; how many hours of such training are set as the minimum training for an officer; and how many officers routinely carry canisters. [99604]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan police Commissioner tells me that the date of issue of CS spray varies between divisions because of the lead-in time necessary to train officers. All officers receive four hours initial training before being issued with CS spray; competence in its use is checked at least once a year thereafter. By March 1998, most divisional officers had been issued with CS spray.

The Metropolitan police do not record centrally the number of officers trained in the use of CS spray, nor the number who routinely carry it, but the Commissioner tells me that the majority of operational officers would routinely carry it.

The CS incapacitant spray issued by the Metropolitan police is manufactured by SAE Alsetex in France and supplied in the United Kingdom by Primetake Ltd. This spray contains a 5 per cent. solution of CS in the solvent MIBK (Methyl iso butyl ketone) and the propellant used is nitrogen. Since September 1997, the Metropolitan police has purchased 30,200 canisters at the cost of £196,000.

Euro 2000

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total costs were of policing the England v Scotland Euro 2000 play-offs match at Wembley on 17 November. [99528]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police advise that the total cost for policing around Wembley Stadium and in Central London was £525,777. Policing costs inside the stadium were met by Wembley plc.

Officer Training

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what training is given to police officers on effecting an arrest on board a bus, and what factors must be taken into account by the arresting officers. [99605]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Police officer training is an operational matter for individual chief officers.

The Commissioner tells me that during Metropolitan police officers probationer continuation training, they receive a session on public transport disputes and legislation. This covers assaults on bus crews and the conduct of passengers. This complements training on issues such as the handling of assaults in public places, powers of arrest and public order offences.

Bus Routes (Crime)

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions in the past year and in what circumstances police have been called to deal with incidents on buses in the police district covering Hackney;

on how many occasions police have made an arrest; and what offences were alleged to have been committed by those arrested. [99600]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner tells me that between 1 October 1998 and 1 October 1999, 283 allegations of crime on bus routes in Hackney borough were recorded. These break down as follows:

	Number
Theft (from the person)	116
Theft (other)	63
Violence against the person	51
Robbery	27
Indecent Assault	5
Other offences	21

The Commissioner tells me that statistics on the number of occasions the police have been called to deal with incidents on buses in Hackney borough, and related arrests, are not recorded specifically.

Human Fertilisation Act 1990

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions have been instigated under the Human Fertilisation Act 1990 on embryos experimented on in advance of 14 days. [99749]

Mr. Charles Clarke: From 1991 to 1998 inclusive, the Home Office court proceedings database shows no defendants proceeded against under the Act for this offence.

Marchioness Disaster

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers and boats were available to the Metropolitan Police Thames Division *(a)* at the time of the Marchioness disaster and *(b)* in 1999. [99623]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner tells me that in 1989 there were 146 police officers attached to Thames Division, and 23 boats were deployed from five bases along the length of the River Thames. Today there are 89 police officers and 18 boats all operating out of central headquarters at Wapping, where activity is focused on river traffic monitoring, central London security patrol and emergency response. The fleet has been substantially modernised since 1989 and an additional two boats are due to be delivered before the end of the year. A more diverse range of specialist resources is also now available to Thames Division than in 1989, including digital marine radio, inflatable pathways and vessel tracking.

Yugoslavia

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK in 1998. [98565]

Mrs. Roche: The number of nationals of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia granted indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom in 1998 was 870. Other information on nationals from the former Yugoslavia was published in Table 6.1 of "Control of Immigration: Statistics, United Kingdom, 1998", a copy of which is in the Library.

Police Numbers (Hillingdon)

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what staffing levels will be in operation in each of the police stations within the Metropolitan Police Service Hillingdon division on *(a)* 25 December, *(b)* 26 December, *(c)* 31 December, *(d)* 1 January 2000 and *(e)* 2 January 2000. [99610]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner tells me that planning is taking place to ensure there are sufficient officers on duty to meet the demands over the Millennium period. The planning process has taken into account the need to retain operational flexibility.

Police Act 1997

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in the implementation of Part V of the Police Act 1997. [99597]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The project to set up the Criminal Records Bureau to implement Part V of the Police Act 1997 is being managed within the framework of a Public-Private Partnership. A business prospectus was issued on 8 October and a bidders conference was held on 14 October. Bids were received on 19 November and are under evaluation. I have been reviewing the timetable and delivery of the project and I shall announce the outcome shortly.

Burglar Alarms

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions his Department has had with the Association of Chief Police Officers over the problems caused by rogue burglar alarms in commercial properties. [100796]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None. I am not aware of any representations to the Home Office on that matter.

Representation of the People Bill

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) for what reason no regulatory impact study of the financial and other effects of the Representation of the People Bill has been issued by his Department in advance of the publication of the Bill; [100673]

(2) when his Department intends to issue a regulatory impact study of the financial and other effects of the Representation of the People Bill; [100674]

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the cost to *(a)* business and *(b)* other organisations of proposals in the Representation of the People Bill to limit the commercial availability of the electoral register; and for what reason no regulatory impact statement has been produced. [100399]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A regulatory impact statement relating to the Representation of the People Bill was placed in the Library on 18 November to coincide with the Bill's introduction.

Electoral Register

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that use of the full electoral register by commercial and charitable groups should become a criminal offence. [100675]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Representation of the People Bill allows regulations to be made prescribing those persons who may purchase or be supplied with the full electoral register and for what purpose. Prohibitions or restrictions may be imposed as to the extent to which information from the full register may be used for purposes other than those for which it was supplied, and it can be made an offence to contravene those prohibitions or restrictions.

Eurodac Regulations

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what position will be taken by the Government when the European Commission's proposal to transfer to the Commission competence over the implementing provisions of the Eurodac Regulations is discussed at the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 2 and 3 December. [100798]

Mrs. Roche: A copy of an explanatory memorandum has been sent to the scrutiny committees setting out the Government's position on the draft regulation. A copy will be available in the Library of the House. On implementing powers, we will judge at the Council itself what is in the United Kingdom's best interests in the light of all the proposals then under discussion.

Passport Fees

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) of 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 125W, if he will place in the Library details of the options regarding passport fee levels which have been submitted for consideration. [100799]

Mrs. Roche: The options for the levels of passport fees are a matter for internal discussion and deliberation between Passport Agency officials and Ministers.

Gurpal Virdi

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how long was the last request by Gurpal Virdi for postponement of the Metropolitan Police discipline hearing; how long the postponement was; and whose availability caused the extra delay. [100031]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner tells me that solicitors representing Sergeant Virdi sought an adjournment of the Metropolitan Police discipline hearing on or around 31 August 1999. The adjournment was sought to allow expert witnesses, acting for the defence, sufficient time to examine the evidence in the case.

Both parties have agreed the hearing should now start on 7 February 2000.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will authorise Gurpal Virdi to meet the police inspectorate before the resolution of the outstanding employment and discipline hearings involving the Metropolitan Police Service; [100029]

(2) if he will authorise the police inspectorate to meet Gurpal Virdi before the resolution of the outstanding employment and discipline hearings involving the Metropolitan Police Service. [100028]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Whether Sergeant Virdi meets a member of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) is a matter for them. I understand that HMIC, in order to avoid any suggestion of compromising proceedings, would not expect to meet a police officer engaged in disciplinary and employment tribunal proceedings until those proceedings, and any related appeals, were complete.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Metropolitan Police Service first received notice of the employment claim by Gurpal Virdi; and what the reasons have been for the delay in the tribunal hearing. [100030]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner tells me that the originating application for the employment tribunal in Sergeant Gurpal Virdi's case was presented on 28 June 1998. The Metropolitan Police Service served notice of its intention to contest the matter.

The tribunal was made aware that there are outstanding disciplinary matters relating to Sergeant Virdi, which are linked to the employment claim. As evidence that will be used both by the defence and the prosecution in the disciplinary hearing will also be used at the employment tribunal, the tribunal cannot proceed until the disciplinary hearing is concluded.

The employment tribunal has been made aware of the mutually agreed revised date to commence the disciplinary hearing on 7 February 2000. The employment tribunal has set the date of 5 May 2000 for a directions hearing with the full hearing due to commence on 14 June 2000.

Mental Illness

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what work is being undertaken by his Department to assess the additional training and other costs if, as a result of the introduction of community treatment orders proposed in the consultation paper "Reform of the Mental Health Act 1983", the police are increasingly engaged in conveying people to hospital. [100720]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government's proposals for the review of the Mental Health Act 1983 were published for consultation in a Green Paper on 16 November. The proposals do not include any additional statutory responsibility for the police to convey people to hospital. However, we shall consider carefully any evidence the police service offers about the implications for them of any aspect of the proposals.

Fuel Duty

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the effect of the fuel duty escalator on the budgets of *(a)* the police, *(b)* the fire and rescue service and *(c)* the ambulance service. [100062]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Budgets for police forces and fire brigades are set locally by their respective police and fire authorities. These budgets reflect local decisions on the authorities' priorities and expenditure needs. It is not possible to discern whether or to what extent fuel price changes have been a factor in these decisions, but we have no evidence to suggest that they have been a consideration of any significance.

The ambulance service is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. However, I understand that the increased costs in fuel duty for the ambulance service since 1996–97 are estimated at £3.73 million. This amounts to less than 0.075 per cent. of hospital and community health services spending over the two years since 1997.

Pilot Election Schemes

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure that local authorities are able successfully to run pilot election schemes, as set out in the Representation of the People Bill, by March 2000. [100658]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We hope that it will be possible for local authorities to run the first pilot schemes at the local elections in May 2000, though this will depend on when the Bill receives Royal Assent.

The Home Office has issued a circular to all local authorities explaining how to apply to run a pilot scheme and has produced guidance on how to undertake an evaluation.

Firearms Surrender Compensation

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) for what reason the claim by Mr. R. Knappe of Ferndown, Dorset, for firearms surrender compensation in respect of firearms surrendered over two years ago has not yet been paid; [99455]

(2) how many claims for firearms surrender compensation have been received by the Firearms Compensation Section from Dorset Constabulary; how many have been completed; how many are still outstanding; and how many have been closed in error; [99451]

(3) how many claims for firearms surrender compensation are still outstanding; and on what date he expects all cases to be completed. [99456]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office Firearms Compensation Section (FCS) received 1,428 compensation claims from the Dorset Police area, of which five were ineligible under the terms of the compensation schemes. As at 22 November, 1,403 claims had been completed and 20 remain outstanding, of which 18 are those where payment offers have been made to the claimants in question and are awaiting acceptance.

As at 22 November, a total of 994 claims remain outstanding, of which 795 are those where payment offers have been made to the claimants in question and are awaiting acceptance. It is not possible to predict exactly when all claims will be completed as this will depend on a number of factors outside our control, including, for example, the receipt of suitable evidence from claimants as to the value of their surrendered property, the outcome of an independent valuation where this is necessary, and claimants acceptance of the payment offers that have been or will be made to them.

The compensation claim made by Mr. Knappe of Ferndown, Dorset was received in the FCS on 26 August 1997. Payment of the Option A and B elements of the claim was made on 22 January 1998 and the case is recorded as having been completed at this point. The claim will be re-examined by the FCS in order to process the outstanding Option C element of the claim.

It is not possible to say how many claims may have been closed in error. They will come to light only when a claimant inquires about progress on a claim which is recorded as completed. Once identified, any such cases are dealt with promptly.

Serious Assault

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he gives to magistrates on the criteria for releasing persons on bail charged with a serious assault rather than remanding them in custody; and if he has any plans to review this guidance. [100347]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* Within the statutory framework laid down by Parliament, in the Bail Act 1976, the decision to grant bail is a matter of independent judicial discretion. For this reason, the Government do not issue guidance to magistrates. However, magistrates are trained to adopt a structured approach to decision making, taking into account a range of factors, including the nature and seriousness of the offence, the possible sentence and whether the defendant is likely to surrender to bail or commit offences while on bail.

Reserve Budget (Police)

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what recent advice the Audit Commission has given to police authorities on the appropriate proportion of their budget to be held in reserve; [100669]

(2) on the basis of the most recent information available, what proportion of total budget police authorities in the UK hold as reserves. [100668]

Mr. Charles Clarke: An Audit Commission report published in July 1999 reported that the average police fund balance in England and Wales (including earmarked and general reserves) at 31 March 1998 was £7.6 million, which represents 6.2 per cent. of average net operating expenditure. However, the level of reserves varies greatly between authorities.

The Audit Commission also reported that the level of general reserves—that is reserves other than earmarked reserves—is often a better indicator of the financial health of an authority. I attach information published by the

Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), showing that at 31 March 1998 police authorities in England and Wales had general reserves totalling £181 million. This represents about 2.6 per cent. of net expenditure.

The Audit Commission noted that general reserves, or balances, ranging from 2 per cent. to 5 per cent. of net operating expenditure are typically seen as reasonable by auditors. CIPFA has issued advice to police authorities recommending that general reserves or balances should be within that range, depending on local circumstances. According to CIPFA figures, 12 police authorities had general reserves below 2 per cent. of net expenditure as at 31 March 1998.

Reserves as at 31 March 1998

	Net expenditure £000	*Reserves £000*	*Percentages*
Avon and Somerset	152,673	2,539	1.7
Bedfordshire	58,570	1,549	2.6
Cambridgeshire	68,681	1,755	2.6
Cheshire	104,005	6,162	5.9
City of London	57,893	—	0.0
Cleveland	75,426	1,563	2.1
Cumbria	61,709	198	0.3
Derbyshire	95,641	2,423	2.5
Devon and Cornwall	155,435	6,064	3.9
Dorset	69,727	1,227	1.8
Durham	75,166	1,524	2.0
Dyfed-Powys	50,952	527	1.0
Essex	157,487	2,148	1.4
Gloucestershire	58,633	3,320	5.7
Greater Manchester	353,319	8,552	2.4
Gwent	64,598	2,123	3.3
Hampshire	180,791	7,835	4.3
Hertfordshire	93,011	3,514	3.8
Humberside	106,220	319	0.3
Kent	174,211	5,528	3.2
Lancashire	169,275	7,421	4.4
Leicestershire	98,789	3,054	3.1
Lincolnshire	66,184	522	0.8
Merseyside	224,327	7,452	3.3
Metropolitan Police	1,676,617	26,495	1.6
Norfolk	80,222	2,735	3.4
Northamptonshire	64,605	5,106	7.9
Northumbria	195,092	—	0.0
North Wales	70,920	2,036	2.9
North Yorkshire	71,840	2,873	4.0
Nottinghamshire	120,556	3,335	2.8
South Wales	159,411	3,600	2.3
South Yorkshire	166,027	6,123	3.7
Staffordshire	110,264	6,996	6.3
Suffolk	63,676	2,002	3.1
Surrey	90,976	3,975	4.4
Sussex	157,631	8,919	5.7
Thames Valley	210,333	5,130	2.4
Warwickshire	51,003	1,750	3.4
West Mercia	107,788	2,880	2.7
West Midlands	360,129	5,010	1.4
West Yorkshire	281,745	3,881	1.4
Wiltshire	58,535	10,907	18.6
England and Wales	6,870,093	181,082	2.6

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Trade Agreements

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to review the effect of trade agreements to which the UK is a party on developing countries. [100423]

Mr. Foulkes: The EU is funding a Sustainability Impact Assessment by Manchester University of the next trade round currently underway in Seattle. The study is developing a methodology for sustainability impact assessment and will make a broad qualitative assessment of the next round. It will look at impacts for four groups of countries—the EU, developing countries, least developed countries and the world as a whole. The Government fully supports the EU's approach and will be consulting with the EU and the consultants as the work progresses. In addition, the UK is part funding a World Bank programme of research on trade and development, which will include some work on impact assessment.

The EU is currently negotiating new trade arrangements with the African, Caribbean and Pacific developing countries as part of the successor agreement to the Lomé IV Convention. The EU funded a consultancy study to investigate the effects of the proposed new arrangements. The results of the study were shared with EU member states and the ACP countries.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received on the effect of trade agreements to which the UK is a party on developing countries. [100421]

Mr. Foulkes: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has received representations from a variety of UK based development agencies and NGO organisations over the past few months. In October, she met with representatives of the British Overseas Aid Group. She gave a speech hosted by the Commonwealth Business Council on 3 November to over 100 NGOs entitled "Making the Next Trade Round Work for the World's Poor". I addressed the United Nations Environment and Development Committee conference "Seattle: A Challenge for Sustainable Development" on 18 November, a conference attended by most of the interested parties within the UK. I represent the Department for International Development (DFID) at the Government's regular meetings with the UK NGO Trade network.

In the preparatory process for the Seattle Ministerial Meeting which will be held this week all WTO members have had an opportunity to put their points across, including their concerns about existing agreements. We will be working to ensure that these comments are taken forward appropriately in the WTO.

Pakistan

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid programmes her Department is supporting in Pakistan; and what criteria she is adopting in determining which aid programmes to support. [99895]

Mr. Foulkes: Direct development assistance to the Government of Pakistan remains frozen following my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's announcement of 15 October. Through civil society channels we are continuing programmes that directly help the poor.

Our priorities include support for improved rural livelihoods, better basic education and health services and assistance to tackle child labour issues. We screen all proposed programmes to ensure they are poverty focused and take account of issues such as gender equality and environmental impact as a matter of course.

Private Aid

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what annual assessment her Department makes of private aid and development assistance to the developing world from the United Kingdom. [100051]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department for International Development reports annually, in our Departmental Report, on the progress of implementation of the Government's official development assistance strategy. Private or non-governmental development agencies are independent organisations, accountable to their own Boards, and to the public and others who provide their funds. We try to ensure, through regular meetings, consultations and monitoring, that there is synergy between the work undertaken by these organisations and the official development programme. We are also about to embark on Partnership Programme Agreements with major non-governmental development agencies which will set out shared objectives over a fixed time-period.

South Africa

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimates she has made of the effect of UK gold sales on employment in South Africa. [99609]

Clare Short: The world price of gold has been in decline for many years prior to the recent announcement of UK gold sales. The relatively modest size of UK gold sales is not sufficient to explain the fall in price of gold earlier this year. The price of gold has risen again since the second auction in September, and continues to fluctuate within a broad margin.

Employment in the gold mining sector in South Africa has fallen from around 385,000 in June 1995, to around 210,000 at present. South African mines are comparatively high cost producers—the present industry average in South Africa is about $230 per ounce, compared to about $100 in parts of South America—and their relative contribution to the South African economy has been in decline for decades. Our development co-operation supports South Africa's efforts at economic diversification and employment creation.

St. Helena

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement concerning progress made on the extension of the jetty to form a breakwater in Jamestown Harbour, St. Helena. [100119]

Mr. Foulkes: The St. Helena Government is presently finalising proposals for a Wharf Improvement Project, including construction of a breakwater. The bulk of the project is expected to be financed from the European Development Fund (EDF). We have advised both the European Commission and the St. Helena Government that we will support the project when it is considered by the EDF Committee. We are also considering the Department for International Development's proposed contribution to the project.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement concerning the breakdown of the RMS St. Helena and the future arrangements for transportation of goods and people to and from St. Helena, Ascension Island and the United Kingdom. [100118]

Mr. Foulkes: The RMS St. Helena suffered a failure of its starboard main engine on 5 November on its way from Cardiff to the south Atlantic. Technical investigation indicated major repairs were required. The ship is expected to be out of service until 10 February. The operators took immediate action to ensure RMS St. Helena's commitments could be met. Its cargo departed from Brest on 27 November and will arrive at St. Helena on 16 December. Parallel arrangements have been made for the delivery of cargo from Cape Town to arrive at St. Helena on 3 December. The schedule for an interim passenger service, with a first arrival date in St. Helena of 19 December, was published on 26 November.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will estimate the costs of consultants' reports for proposed schemes on the Island of St. Helena in each year since 1995. [100117]

Mr. Foulkes: The total value of consultancy contracts entered into for the provision of advice to the Government of St. Helena for each year since 1995 is as follows:

	£
1995	88,104
1996	97,833
1997	400,490
1998	188,238
1999	46,522

These figures do not include the value of contracts entered into for the provision of practical support or for the implementation of projects, eg medical personnel, nurse and teacher training, and construction design/ supervision.

Chechnya

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support her Department has given in the past six months to Chechnya by way of humanitarian aid. [100052]

Mr. Foulkes: The Government is deeply concerned about the humanitarian consequences of the conflict in the North Caucasus. We are in close touch with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UN agencies about those displaced as a result of the conflict. We have contributed £0.5 million to the ICRC's appeal for the region. The UK has also contributed through its part of the 1.2 million euro earmarked by the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO); of this 1 million euro has been disbursed to UNHCR.

Background:

1. Precise information on the numbers displaced in the North Caucasus is difficult to obtain. The region is dangerous for expatriates.

2. But following western pressure a UN needs assessment team visited Dagestan and Ingushetia in early November. They reported that there are 185,000 IDPs from Chechnya in Ingushetia; 20,000 IDPs from Chechnya in other regions; and 18,000 IDPs within

Dagestan. The team concluded "the humanitarian situation is very difficult and is likely to deteriorate unless humanitarian action is enhanced immediately".

3. We received an appeal from ICRC to which we contributed £0.5 million. We have now also received a UN inter-agency appeal which we are considering.

4. This reply is consistent with the draft reply to Lord Moynihan's question answered on 10 November.

India

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the humanitarian situation in Orissa. [99237]

Mr. Foulkes: The cyclone that hit Orissa on 29 August has caused widespread damage and suffering. Millions of people have been affected by the cyclone and its aftermath. Alongside the Government of India's own efforts, we have committed over £2.5 million for immediate relief. Much of this has been channelled through five UK-based non-governmental organisations (CARE, Christian Aid, Save the Children, Oxfam and Help Age International), which are working through Indian partner agencies to help the most seriously affected families. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has received funding to provide food, as have various United Nations agencies such as UNICEF. A team from our Department concluded an on-the-spot assessment to guide our decisions on targeting the most needy areas and supporting the most effective agencies.

In the coming months we shall be looking at re-starting our development aid programme in Orissa, alongside the major rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts that will be required.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she expects the £10 million assistance to Sierra Leone announced by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to be available to improve health facilities in the Kambia region; and if she will make a statement. [100063]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department for International Development (DFID) is providing the Government of Sierra Leone with assistance for the implementation of the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process for ex-combatants (comprising £3 million for logistical support and a £3.5 million contribution to the World Bank managed Multi Donor Trust Fund); over £1 million towards the cost of the Commonwealth Police Development Task Force; support to the Sierra Leone Ministry of Defence for security sector reform projects to help create a civilian structure to manage the armed forces (£1.7 million); the provision of a ferry boat (£0.9 million) and around £2.4 million for a range of non-governmental organisation activities to help the country cope with its humanitarian needs. DFID has also provided £5 million worth of emergency budget support.

A number of good governance projects, including assistance to help the country prepare for democratic elections in 2001, are presently under consideration. Also, a second tranche of budget support to help Sierra Leone clear its debt arrears to the international finance institutions is likely to be approved before the end of the year.

DFID does not have any plans at present for funding projects in the health sector. The European Commission is preparing a programme but its implementation will depend upon obtaining access to outlying districts, especially those such as Kambia which is controlled by rebel (RUF) forces who have not yet entered DDR.

IT Projects

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the information technology projects currently being undertaken by her Department and by agencies responsible to her Department, including *(a)* the start date, *(b)* the planned completion date, *(c)* the current expected completion date, *(d)* the planned costs and *(e)* the current estimated cost; and if she will make a statement. [99671]

Mr. Foulkes: The only significant current project in the Department for International Development (DFID) is the roll-out of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to provide on-line access to our major offices overseas. Work commenced in July 1999 and is scheduled for completion on time and within budget (£400,000) in early 2001. DFID systems are small scale and low risk. Our technical architectural values ensure appropriate use is made of packaged software and bespoke solutions. Our total annual IT budget is around £5.5 million. All IT projects have been delivered within 10 per cent. of estimates and implementation schedules.

DFID has a rolling programme for development of IT infrastructure and Corporate Business Systems. This will include two key corporate systems: a phased development of a Performance Reporting Information System for Management (PRISM), and a resource accounting and budgeting system (CODA). Development work will resume in early 2000.

Our plans for major IT projects in the future will include: the upgrade of desktop operating systems and applications suite, the upgrade of desktop hardware, the replacement of the Management Information System, an electronic document management system, and contract administration.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how often she meets her French counterpart; and if she will make a statement. [100049]

Mr. Foulkes: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State frequently meets the French Minister for Co-operation, both bilaterally and at international meetings such as the EU Development Council and World Bank/IMF Development Committee. Their last bilateral meeting was on 18 November and they plan to meet again on 9 December.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Care Costs (Children)

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the cost of hotel accommodation for children in care in the North and West Belfast Trust in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [99266]

Mr. George Howarth: During the last 12 months North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust has used hotel accommodation for one young person in its care at a cost of £975.

DNA Register

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people are registered on the DNA Register in Northern Ireland. [100320]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Forensic Science Agency under its chief executive, Dr. Adams. I have asked him for a reply to be given.

Letter from R. W. Adams to Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson, dated 29 November 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question on how many people are on the DNA Register. At the end of October 1999 the Northern Ireland DNA database held profiles of 11,137 people.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many lone parents have been contacted under the New Deal in *(a)* Greater London and *(b)* Leaside District; how many have attended an initial interview; and what proportion has been successfully placed in the employment option. [99634]

Ms Jowell: The information requested is shown in the following table.

	Greater London [1]	*Leaside ES District*
Number of lone parents who have received invitation letters	84,840	[2]—
Number of lone parents attending an initial interview	12,740	552
Number of lone parents agreeing to participate in NDLP	11,090	471
Number lone parents gaining jobs	2,280	66
As a proportion of the number agreeing to participate (percentage)	21	14

[1] Greater London is defined as the following ES Districts: Thameside; Southwark; Lambeth; West End; Hackney and City; Crawley; Romford; Edgware; Wembley; West London; Ealing; Thames Gateway; Wandsworth; Sutton, Merton and Kingston; Ilford; Leaside; Croydon and Bromley; Lewisham.

[2] Data on the number of lone parents contacted in Leaside ES District are not available. The combined figure for the number of NDLP letters issued in Leaside and Edgware ES Districts is 10,680.

British Teachers (European Schools)

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he plans to take to secure an extension of the length of contracts of British teachers working in the European Schools beyond the current nine-year maximum. [100064]

Mr. Wicks: None.

FE Colleges

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to receive the report from the National Audit Office concerning the funding of further education colleges. [100245]

Mr. Wicks: The timing of the presentation of National Audit Office reports to Parliament is decided by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

TECs

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what level of provision each TEC has made for the severance packages of its chief executive. [100109]

Mr. Wicks: The information requested is not held centrally.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what level of liabilities are reported in the accounts of each of the 72 TECs for 1998–99. [100105]

Mr. Wicks: The following table gives the liabilities for each of the 72 TECs as reported in their 1998–99 audited statutory accounts.

Liabilities reported in the TECs' accounts for 1998–99

£

TEC	*Current liabilities*	*Long term liabilities*	*Total liabilities*
Isle of Wight	989,081	0	989,081
Milton Keynes and North Bucks	2,476,037	0	2,476,037
Sussex	5,506,000	0	5,506,000
Thames Valley Enterprise	4,278,665	354	4,279,019
Surrey	2,077,688	0	2,077,688
Heart of England	2,152,156	130,197	2,282,353
Hampshire	4,502,000	20,000	4,522,000
Kent	7,636,526	105,434	7,741,960

Liabilities reported in the TECs' accounts for 1998–99

£

TEC	Current liabilities	Long term liabilities	Total liabilities
FOCUS	12,303,000	0	12,303,000
AZTEC	3,255,169	0	3,255,169
North West London	2,212,456	356,871	2,569,327
LETEC	7,024,701	120,000	7,144,701
West London	7,670,274	2,313,248	9,983,522
South London	6,188,000	0	6,188,000
North London	6,230,962	0	6,230,962
Bedfordshire	2,572,517	374,195	2,946,712
Suffolk	2,784,381	0	2,784,381
Greater Peterborough	2,451,339	82,676	2,534,015
Norfolk and Waveney	3,858,000	0	3,858,000
Hertfordshire	6,326,000	454,000	6,780,000
Essex	5,247,000	0	5,247,000
Cambstec	1,971,900	67,103	2,039,003
The Link Group (Gloucester)	1,955,155	37,785	1,992,940
Wiltshire	3,476,645	0	3,476,645
Westec	6,321,000	0	6,321,000
Somerset	1,923,021	226,906	2,149,927
Dorset	4,316,992	0	4,316,992
Prosper	6,811,000	0	6,811,000
Coventry and Warwickshire	5,350,802	0	5,350,802
Dudley	2,468,992	148,265	2,617,257
Wolverhampton	2,433,000	0	2,433,000
Staffordshire	3,938,000	0	3,938,000
Shropshire	3,036,069	48,000	3,084,069
Walsall	1,237,523	0	1,237,523
Sandwell	2,979,456	33,814	3,013,270
HAWTEC	5,979,665	699,652	6,679,317
Birmingham	9,712,000	0	9,712,000
North Derbyshire	1,657,758	0	1,657,758
Greater Nottinghamshire	1,953,000	0	1,953,000
North Nottinghamshire	2,219,611	0	2,219,611
Leicestershire	3,083,678	0	3,083,678
Lincolnshire	3,479,244	0	3,479,244
Northamptonshire	1,762,303	0	1,762,303
South Derbyshire	2,400,000	0	2,400,000
Sheffield	4,813,000	0	4,813,000
Calderdale and Kirklees	3,297,581	0	3,297,581
Bradford and District	2,399,946	0	2,399,946
Barnsley and Doncaster	4,400,000	9,000	4,409,000
Wakefield	2,113,181	0	2,113,181
Leeds	2,362,034	0	2,362,034
Humberside	4,156,021	23,711	4,179,732
Rotherham	2,898,837	326,683	3,225,520
North Yorkshire	2,429,000	0	2,429,000
Rochdale	1,327,936	0	1,327,936
South and East Cheshire	2,149,310	221,009	2,370,319
Oldham	1,423,500	0	1,423,500
Stockport and High Peak	1,835,083	0	1,835,083
Bolton and Bury	2,798,985	1,291,376	4,090,361
Manchester	11,415,200	0	11,415,200
Wigan	2,890,558	3,924	2,894,482
CEWTEC	3,735,570	0	3,735,570
Cumbria	2,299,592	361,163	2,660,755
LAWTEC	4,617,144	0	4,617,144
Eltec	6,954,928	0	6,954,928
St. Helens	1,773,686	15,000	1,788,686
Normidtec	4,642,854	0	4,642,854
Merseyside	7,088,309	15,005	7,103,314
Sunderland City	2,851,917	6,496,080	9,347,997
Northumberland	4,224,816	5,819,136	10,043,952
County Durham	4,496,169	0	4,496,169
Tees Valley	5,998,000	245,000	6,243,000
Tyneside	3,914,000	762,000	4,676,000
Total Liabilities	283,515,923	20,807,587	304,323,510

Source:
1998–99 TEC statutory accounts

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what contingency plans he has prepared to deal with under-estimated liabilities in the same manner as reserves and assets upon the winding up of the TECs. [100107]

Mr. Wicks: As private companies, it is ultimately the responsibility of each TEC to ensure it assesses its liabilities accurately and that it has available sufficient funds to meet these. The Secretary of State has no obligation through the contract to meet any liabilities which cannot be met from a TEC's own resources. However, through its contract with the TEC, the Secretary of State has agreed to put in place arrangements to provide funds to meet the costs arising after 25 March 2001 in respect of those persons already participating under Work Based Training for Young People and Work Based Learning for Adults so that they can complete their individual training plans. Similar arrangements also exist for any non-discretionary activity directly funded by the Secretary of State.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to ensure that the level of liabilities reported in TEC accounts is accurate and based on a realistic appraisal of the future costs each is likely to incur. [100106]

Mr. Wicks: TEC statutory accounts are required under company law to be audited by the TECs' external auditors. As part of their work, the auditors will have to satisfy themselves that the level of liabilities reported are valid and that the accounts give a true and fair view of the finances of the TEC. Government Offices are also discussing transition plans with TECs which include a detailed assessment of the assets and liabilities of each TEC.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the moneys each of the TECs is contributing to the legal fund controlled by the TEC National Council is listed as liabilities in their audited statutory accounts 1998–99; and if they are liabilities upon the Secretary of State's funds. [100108]

Mr. Wicks: The latest available audited statutory accounts are for the year ended 28 March 1999 and as such precede the announcement of the White Paper "Learning to Succeed". They do not include any liabilities for contributions to a legal fund.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list expenditure by each TEC *(a)* since the publication of the White Paper, "Learning to Succeed-a New Framework for Post-16 Learning" in June 1999 and *(b)* in the 12 months preceding its publication. [99935]

Mr. Wicks: The following table shows a list of expenditure in the 12 months preceding the publication which has been taken from the audited statutory accounts for the year ended 28 March 1999. For the period since the publication (July to September 1999) the TECs management accounts, although not directly comparable, show total expenditure of £370 million.

Expenditure by each TEC (1998–99)

£

TEC	*Direct expenditure*	*Administration costs*	*Total expenditure*
Isle of Wight	2,708,738	1,168,021	3,876,759
Milton Keynes and North Buckinghamshire	9,790,633	1,316,444	11,107,077
Sussex	20,555,000	5,205,000	25,760,000
Thames Valley Enterprise	22,819,163	3,122,054	25,941,217
Surrey	12,889,884	2,952,264	15,842,148
Heart of England	10,175,917	4,174,014	14,349,931
Hampshire	28,245,000	3,455,000	31,700,000
Kent	26,551,139	6,782,937	33,334,076
FOCUS	38,353,000	8,679,000	47,032,000
AZTEC	13,496,011	1,707,968	15,203,979
North West London	9,835,424	1,232,898	11,068,325
LETEC	30,088,516	3,459,854	33,548,370
West London	22,113,840	1,994,456	24,108,296
South London	31,706,000	4,956,000	36,662,000
North London	16,661,216	4,100,121	20,761,337
Bedfordshire	11,933,191	2,530,158	14,463,349
Suffolk	14,030,940	1,178,790	15,209,730
Greater Peterborough	9,630,473	1,935,513	11,565,986
Norfolk and Waveney	15,503,000	1,114,000	16,617,000
Hertfordshire	21,081,000	2,753,000	23,834,000
Essex	25,277,000	3,174,000	28,451,000
Cambstec	7,850,029	2,189,538	10,039,567
The Link Group (Gloucester)	12,838,177	2,112,791	14,950,968
Wiltshire	10,006,885	1,915,598	11,922,483
Westec	18,635,000	3,060,000	21,695,000
Somerset	9,856,380	3,488,627	13,345,007
Dorset	13,497,468	1,460,454	14,957,922
Prosper	36,775,000	6,138,000	42,913,000
Coventry and Warwickshire	21,660,079	4,163,847	25,823,926
Dudley	9,238,486	1,140,324	10,378,810
Wolverhampton	8,910,000	1,797,000	10,707,000
Staffordshire	26,630,000	2,500,000	29,130,000
Shropshire	10,534,535	2,228,184	12,762,719
Walsall	8,152,595	1,777,744	9,930,339
Sandwell	11,295,422	1,431,064	12,726,486

Expenditure by each TEC (1998–99)

£

TEC	Direct expenditure	Administration costs	Total expenditure
HAWTEC	16,466,530	4,009,831	20,476,361
Birmingham	47,966,000	4,131,000	52,097,000
North Derbyshire	9,854,454	2,447,470	12,301,924
Greater Nottinghamshire	12,893,000	2,988,000	15,881,000
North Nottinghamshire	15,200,648	521,202	15,721,850
Leicestershire	18,721,539	2,907,925	21,629,464
Lincolnshire	22,773,538	0	22,773,538
Northamptonshire	11,038,330	2,185,219	13,223,549
South Derbyshire	12,189,000	3,948,000	16,137,000
Sheffield	20,924,000	1,340,000	22,264,000
Calderdale and Kirklees	17,531,845	3,468,058	20,999,903
Bradford and District	12,224,636	1,703,641	13,928,277
Barnsley and Doncaster	19,295,000	3,006,000	22,301,000
Wakefield	7,729,096	976,419	8,705,512
Leeds	10,832,047	3,280,970	14,113,017
Humberside	27,044,568	0	27,044,568
Rotherham	13,171,477	2,520,521	15,691,998
North Yorkshire	15,262,000	3,309,000	18,571,000
Rochdale	7,993,177	1,025,051	9,018,228
South and East Cheshire	14,024,226	1,310,210	15,334,436
Oldham	7,264,885	1,852,299	9,117,184
Stockport and High Peak	12,035,779	755,228	12,791,007
Bolton and Bury	10,858,737	3,754,613	14,613,350
Manchester	44,686,802	2,317,647	47,004,449
Wigan	8,043,574	4,597,510	12,641,084
CEWTEC	16,733,713	2,578,851	19,312,564
Cumbria	17,880,991	2,181,318	20,062,309
LAWTEC	26,370,221	0	26,370,221
Eltec	19,259,316	0	19,259,316
St. Helens	8,968,581	1,264,213	10,232,794
Normidtec	14,027,793	1,221,016	15,248,809
Merseyside	38,832,216	6,630,355	45,462,571
Sunderland City	13,651,950	2,353,957	16,005,907
Northumberland	14,736,728	3,759,216	18,495,944
County Durham	15,655,656	2,887,453	18,543,109
Tees Valley	28,103,000	5,968,000	34,071,000
Tyneside	30,584,000	3,563,000	34,147,000
Total expenditure	1,260,154,194	193,157,856	1,453,312,050

Source:
1998–99 TEC statutory accounts

Students (Fees)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the effect of the imposition of higher education tuition fees on student enrolments, broken down by *(a)* socio-economic class, *(b)* duration of course and *(c)* area of study. [99936]

Mr. Wicks: The Government believe the new arrangements for paying higher education tuition fees, in which students from lower income groups pay no fees, are fair and just. Students from the lower socio-economic groups have not been deterred from applying to enter higher education. Nor is there evidence that student choice, in terms of subject of study and length of course, has been affected.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the effect of the statutory restrictions on charging full-time students for the setting of fees for modules of instruction in higher education institutions. [99937]

Mr. Wicks: Allowing higher education institutions to charge top-up fees would restrict access to students from less well-off backgrounds and limit student choice. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made it clear that any institution which charges, or announces its intention to charge, top-up fees could incur financial penalties. He is not aware of any evidence that this has had a detrimental effect on the ability of higher education institutions to run the courses they wish to provide.

Tennis Courts, Banstead Downs

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when his Department will inform Banstead Downs Lawn Tennis Club of its decision on the club's proposal to purchase land owned by Surrey County Council and lay new tennis courts. [99576]

Jacqui Smith: The Secretary of State has not yet made a final decision on Surrey County Council's application to sell an area of playing field to Banstead Downs Lawn Tennis Club. He has, however, indicated that he is minded to reject the application and the Council has been invited to comment. He will not make a final decision on this case until he has had the opportunity to consider further representations from the Council.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Road Safety

18. **Mr. Jenkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact on road safety of the introduction of 20 mph zones. [99026]

Mr. Mullin: Following their introduction in 1991, monitoring of the first 20 mph zones showed a significant reduction in accident casualties, particularly among cyclists and pedestrians. We legislated in the summer to allow local authorities to make 20 mph speed limits and 20 mph zones without the need to obtain the consent of the Secretary of State. It is too early to judge the effect of that on road safety.

Traffic Congestion

19. **Mr. Breed:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to alleviate traffic congestion problems in Dobwalls, south-east Cornwall. [99027]

Mr. Hill: Pending the outcome of the London to south Wales and south-west multi-modal study, the Highways Agency is looking at measures to relieve congestion and improve safety and has started a process of consultation to obtain local views on options.

Regional Development

20. **Mr. Dawson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the strategy for regional development in the north-west. [99028]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government are currently assessing the regional strategies of all eight regional development agencies following their handover to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on 26 October. We aim to respond to the RDAs by the end of the year.

34. **Ms Kelly:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact of the regional development agency in the north-west. [99044]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The North-West Development Agency has already made a good start. It has established itself as a significant regional body with the capability of improving skills and competitiveness and attracting inward investment in the north-west.

Millennium Villages

21. **Dr. George Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans for further millennium villages. [99030]

Ms Armstrong: The Deputy Prime Minister announced in October that a further five millennium communities competitions would take place. We are currently reviewing the lessons learnt from the first two schemes. English Partnerships jointly with the RDAs are being asked to come forward, with the support and active involvement of local communities, with options on suitable sites/localities for the competitions by February 2000. We have also asked them to examine further the options for delivering the competitive process and to present proposals within the same timeframe. We aim to announce the next millennium communities site in the spring of 2000.

We are also considering the findings of a research report commissioned by the Department earlier this year to create a framework to evaluate and measure millennium communities and other developments. This will be published in the new year.

We plan to disseminate the research widely and to promote a debate on its findings, including its proposals for a sustainability framework. We will also be disseminating the lessons learnt from the first two millennium communities so far.

Transatlantic Air Routes (Heathrow)

22. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to make an announcement regarding increasing the number of transatlantic air routes from Heathrow airport. [99031]

Mr. Mullin: The UK Government are keen to liberalise air services arrangements between the United Kingdom and the United States, but we need to ensure that we do this in a way which is balanced and which enables UK airlines to compete on fair terms.

Clean Fuels

23. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to encourage the use of cleaner fuels. [99032]

30. **Mr. Sawford:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to promote less polluting types of fuel. [99040]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have already introduced fiscal incentives to encourage the use of ultra-low-sulphur diesel, which now makes up the vast majority of diesel supplied in this country, and road fuel gases. We will continue to promote the use of cleaner alterative fuels through the Powershift Programme and, through active participation in European programmes, to improve the environmental performance of conventional fuels. We will continue to look for opportunities for cost-effective ways to promote all cleaner fuels.

Rail Safety

24. **Mrs. Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce legislation on maximum passenger numbers in railway carriages for safety reasons. [99033]

Mr. Hill: I have no plans for such legislation.

The Health and Safety Executive, which advises the Government on all rail safety matters, regard this issue as primarily one of passenger comfort, not safety.

Train operators must meet overcrowding standards laid down by the shadow Strategic Rail Authority for passenger comfort.

Local Services

25. **Valerie Davey:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of best value on the provision of local services to the public. [99034]

Ms Armstrong: An interim evaluation of the 40 best value pilot authorities, carried out by Warwick Business School, was published on 22 November. All the authorities found the best value framework more challenging than they had expected. After only 12 months work there have been real examples of improved services and cost savings, and real engagement with local people.

A3 (Hindhead)

26. **Mrs. Virginia Bottomley:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to visit the A3 at Hindhead to discuss environmental safety and economic issues. [99035]

Ms Armstrong: My right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Transport met the right hon. Member on 13 September, when they discussed all the principal issues associated with the problems on A3 at Hindhead. He undertook to visit the area when his diary permitted.

Ofwat

27. **Mr. Dobbin:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what effect pricing levels set by Ofwat for 2000–05 will have on the cost of services to consumers. [99037]

Mr. Mullin: On 25 November the Director General of Water Services announced his decisions on price limits for water and sewerage services for the period 2000–05. I have arranged for my hon. Friend to receive a copy of the Director General's decision.

Integrated Transport Strategy

28. **Mr. Heald:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he intends to proceed with his plans for an integrated transport strategy; and if he will make a statement. [99038]

Mr. Hill: Our integrated transport strategy is already delivering results, including 1,800 new or enhanced rural bus services in England, and significant growth in the number of people travelling by train. Our Transport Bill will contain measures that will enable us to build on these achievements, providing more choice and improving everyone's quality of life.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

29. **Mrs. Brinton:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how the Government plan to strengthen the protection of sites of special scientific interest. [99039]

Mr. Mullin: The Government issued "A Framework for Action" in August, setting out proposals for improving the protection of SSSIs.

It was announced in the Queen's Speech on 17 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 4–7 that the Countryside Amenity and Conservation Bill would be included in the legislative programme for this Session.

Rail Stations

31. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to encourage the refurbishment of rail stations. [99041]

Mr. Hill: Railtrack is committed to completing its nationwide station regeneration programme by 2001. Station operators also have obligations under their franchise agreement to meet a number of basic standards, such as cleanliness and lighting, within 18 months of taking over the franchise; and within three years, further obligations in respect of public communications systems and waiting accommodation.

Dumping

32. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has to prevent the dumping in rural areas of worn-out tractors and other agricultural vehicles. [99042]

Mr. Mullin: The Secretary of State has no such powers.

London Underground

33. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the operation of London Underground's current safety regime. [99043]

Mr. Hill: Safety is, and remains, the top priority for London Underground Ltd. (LUL). The Railway (Safety Case) Regulations 1994 require London Underground to prepare a safety case setting out its approach to safety management.

The most recent version of this safety case was accepted by HM railway inspectorate on 14 September 1999 and LUL's performance against it will be subject to HMRI monitoring and review.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what central Government support the Tube will continue to receive in 2000–01 and 2001–02; and what continuing support he estimates will be required in subsequent years. [99571]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* London Transport (LT) have been allocated Government support of £248.7 million for 2000–01. This figure does not include money earmarked for residual expenditure on the Jubilee Line Extension.

Some of this funding will be transferred to the Mayor in July next year, when Transport for London (TFL) assumes responsibility for LT activities other than the Underground.

Levels of Government support for the Underground in 2001–02 and thereafter have not yet been determined. They will depend on whether and on what terms Public-Private Partnership (PPP) contracts are let; decisions on the level of Government funding to be taken following the 2000 spending review; and decisions on funding and fares made by the Mayor for London.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what performance targets have been set arising from projected

expenditure of £1,190 million on the Piccadilly line and (b) £900 million on the Victoria line of the London Underground over the next 15 years; and if he will make a statement. [99638]

Mr. Hill: The figures quoted were London Underground's indicative estimates of the likely cost of achieving the performance specification to be set out in the PPP contracts. In fact, it will be the responsibility of the Underground's private sector partners to determine the actual level of investment required to deliver the improved performance we want.

Details of the performance targets have yet to be finalised, but they will require improvements in capability, availability, ambience and asset condition. This will enable London Underground to provide passengers with faster, more reliable and more comfortable journeys.

New Deal for Communities

35. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of the New Deal for Communities in Sheffield. [99045]

Ms Armstrong: I am delighted that Sheffield is one of the 22 areas eligible to put forward proposals for the transformation of a deprived neighbourhood under the second round of the New Deal for Communities. I will ensure that local people, businesses and organisations get the support they need to deliver real equality of opportunity and choice in that neighbourhood.

Peat Working Group

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made by the Peat Working Group. [100993]

Mr. Raynsford: The Peat Working Group, which has been reviewing the adequacy of existing planning policies and guidance on the extraction and use of peat since 1997, has published a report of its work today.

I am grateful to the Peat Working Group for providing this factual assessment of the complex and wide-ranging issues surrounding peat extraction and the use of growing media in horticulture and gardening.

This Government are committed to ensuring that there is adequate protection for our habitats and wildlife. We are already looking very carefully at the risk of damage caused by peat extraction to sites of national and international importance.

The group considers that existing Government policy is sufficient to safeguard areas of existing conservation or archaeological value from future proposals for peat working sites. But a number of active sites granted planning permission before their conservation value was recognised continue to be worked, despite their designation or identification as sites of national or international importance.

We are currently looking at options for bringing forward reviews of consents on Natura 2000 sites. In addition, we have also asked English Nature to look closely at the effects of all planning permissions, not just those affecting peat bogs, on sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs).

However, it is clear from the group's work that despite continuing improvements in the quality and marketing of alternatives, there continues to be a strong demand for peat as a growing medium, particularly by the amateur gardener and the professional horticulture sector. I welcome the suggestions made by the working group about how sales of alternative materials for growing plants could be increased, and we shall now be considering how to take this forward.

A copy of the report has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Bellwin Scheme (Floods)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide financial assistance to Worcester City Council under the Bellwin scheme for costs incurred following the severe flooding in the area between 27 October and 3 November 1998. [101102]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I am satisfied that financial assistance under the Bellwin scheme is justified in the case of Worcester City Council given the exceptional nature of the floods and the damage caused. A scheme will, therefore, be established under section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Grant has generally been paid to authorities at a rate of 85 per cent. of their eligible expenditure above a threshold. However, a Bellwin scheme was activated for Worcester as a result of the 1998 Easter floods. Since Worcester have already spent over their threshold for 1998–99 in dealing with that emergency, it seems reasonable that they should not have to do so in dealing with a second incident in the same financial year. I therefore propose to waive the threshold.

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide financial assistance to Herefordshire District Council under the Bellwin scheme for costs incurred following the severe flooding in the area on three occasions during 1998–99. [101103]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I am satisfied that financial assistance under the Bellwin scheme is justified in the case of Herefordshire District Council given the exceptional nature of the floods and the damage caused. A scheme will, therefore, be established under section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Grant will be paid to the authority to cover 85 per cent. of the eligible costs above a threshold which have been incurred by the authority in dealing with the flooding.

Aviation Safety

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish the Government's reply to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee's report into aviation safety published on 21 July. [101123]

Mr. Mullin: The Government have laid before the House today a Command Paper—4539—which is a consolidated response on behalf of the Government and of the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee's Fourteenth Report, titled "Aviation Safety", published on 21 July 1999.

The Government welcome the "Aviation Safety" report, which covered a wide-ranging and detailed examination of aviation safety issues by the Committee. We note that the evidence the Committee received showed that the United Kingdom has an excellent safety record, particularly in the commercial aviation sector. The Committee seeks reassurance that all necessary steps are being taken to maintain that record in the face of the challenges presented by a dynamic and growing industry, in which the UK is a world leader. The Government and the CAA agree that the current high standard of aviation safety in the United Kingdom must be maintained and, where possible, improved. We fully recognise that aviation safety requires constant vigilance by regulators and the regulated alike.

The Committee makes 29 recommendations, some to the Government, some to the CAA, and others to both. Both we and the CAA have considered the recommendations fully and carefully and they are dealt with in turn, and in detail, in the Command Paper.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the current legislation relating to telecommunications masts. [99311]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* The installation of any telecommunications mast in a National Park, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, a conservation area, a Site of Special Scientific Interest and the Broads, or a mast of more than 15 metres in height elsewhere, is subject to a full planning application. In other cases, licensed telecommunications code system operators are authorised under Part 24 of Schedule 2 to the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (GPDO) to install masts of up to 15 metres in height. This is subject to a prior approval procedure, under which the local planning authority has the opportunity to say whether it wishes to approve details of the siting and appearance of the installation.

These GPDO provisions were amended earlier this year by SI 1999 No. 1661. We have no current plans to make further changes to the GPDO in respect of telecommunication masts.

The Government are aware of public concern about mobile phone systems and health and has set up an independent expert group to advise on possible risks to public health. The group, chaired by Sir William Stewart FRS, FRSE, is currently holding open meetings around the UK to take views.

Dry Stone Walls

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what proposals he has to protect dry stone walls in areas of outstanding natural beauty and conservation; and if he will make a statement; [99531]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of dry stone walls which have been removed from upland country over the last *(a)* five and *(b)* 10 years. [99530]

Mr. Mullin: This information is not available. However, the Countryside Survey 1990 estimated that the total length of dry stone walls in upland areas of Great Britain in 1990 was 99,710 km, which represented a reduction in length of 13 per cent. since 1984.

The most appropriate way of tackling the loss of dry stone walls is by encouraging their restoration and maintenance. Grants are currently available in England under the Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas schemes operated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Before taking decisions on any legislative protection, we shall need to take account of the possible impact of any regulatory proposals, as well as the results of the Countryside Survey 2000, which will provide up-to-date estimates of the changes in length and condition of dry stone walls.

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* the Peak District and *(b)* the North Yorkshire national parks about the destruction of dry stone walls. [99532]

Mr. Mullin: The destruction of dry stone walls has not been raised in recent discussions held with the Peak District or North Yorkshire national parks.

GM Oilseed Rape (Royston)

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when genetically modified winter oilseed rape was planted at Summerhouse Farm, Royston, Hertfordshire, under consent 98/R19/18; and if he will publish the opinion of the farm-scale evaluations scientific steering committee on the relevance of the planting to biodiversity. [99537]

Mr. Mullin: The genetically modified winter oilseed rape planted at Summerhouse Farm, Royston, Hertfordshire, under consent 98/R19/18, was planted between 19 August and 14 September 1999. The trial is for research and development purposes by the consent holder AgrEvo and consists of a number of small field plots each approximately 20 square metres. It is not a field scale release and is not subject to any consideration by the farm-scale evaluations scientific steering committee.

Post Offices

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the principal activities of his Department and its agencies which provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices and *(b)* other post offices; if he will assess whether the level of business generated in each case is likely to increase or decrease over the next five years; and which new areas of business for post offices are likely to be developed by his Department and its agencies over the same period. [99558]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information is as follows:

General activities

My Department uses the Royal Mail for postal services. The level of business is likely to be affected by the increased use of the internet and e-mail.

Driver Vehicle Licensing Agency

The DVLA collects vehicle excise duty through 4,000 post offices in Great Britain—of these 584 are Crown Offices. All 18,500 post offices issue licence savings stamps, application forms and

information leaflets. Trials are to be introduced under the current contract with Post Office Counters Ltd. to improve service levels and DVLA and POCL are discussing the possibility of introducing an over the counter application form and identification checking service. POCL will be invited to bid when the contract is re-tendered in 2002.

Vehicle Inspectorate

The Inspectorate, through the DVLA contract, uses the post office network for relicensing vehicles by checking the validity of MOT certificates. The Inspectorate is developing an MOT computerisation project and is exploring ways in which the post office can support the project. This may reduce the level of special deliveries made by the post office on behalf of the Inspectorate.

Ward Boundaries

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria the Local Government Boundary Commission must follow in the creation of local authority ward boundaries. [99762]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Local Government Commission's statutory criteria for electoral reviews are to secure effective and convenient local government and to reflect the interests and identities of local communities. They must also take into account statutory rules which include that the number of local government electors shall be, as nearly as may be, the same in every ward of the district; that every ward of a parish with a parish council shall lie wholly within a single ward of the district; and have regard to the desirability of fixing boundaries which are and will remain easily identifiable.

Red Routes

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to extend priority red routes *(a)* in London and *(b)* to other cities. [100070]

Mr. Hill: There are no plans to extend red routes in London. From July 2000, the red route network will be replaced by the GLA road network and will become the responsibility of the Mayor. Elsewhere, it is primarily for local authorities to use their existing traffic management powers to control parking effectively and give appropriate priority to buses. We look to them to so do, in the context of developing their local transport plans and bus strategies.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the effect of priority red routes in London on carbon dioxide emissions; [100069]

(2) what assessment he has made of the effect of priority red routes on the number of accidents on *(a)* red routes and *(b)* other roads; [100071]

(3) what assessment he has made of the effect of priority red routes on local air quality in each London borough; [100068]

(4) what assessment he has made of the effect of priority red routes, in each London borough, on *(a)* the volume of motorised traffic and *(b)* traffic speeds on (i) red routes and (ii) other roads. [100067]

Mr. Hill: The Traffic Director for London monitors the effects of the traffic management measures on the red route network (the network) as a whole (not individually by borough) to determine the performance of the network. Reports on these are published annually. His latest report shows:

(a) traffic volumes have not changed on the network during the period of implementation;

(b)(i) depending on time of day, average journey speeds on the network were between 17.0 and 22.9 mph in 1998. This is a considerable improvement on the journey speeds of between 14.3 and 18.4 mph in 1994 before red route implementation commenced;

(b)(ii) The Traffic Director does not monitor journey speeds off the network.

The Traffic Director for London maintains a record of traffic conditions on red routes from which it is possible to gain a better understanding of the changes in emissions from road vehicles. He does not directly monitor air quality but uses the collected data to model emissions. Between 1995–97 the model shows between 3 per cent. and 5 per cent. less carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons emissions on implemented sections of the red route compared with non-implemented sections.

According to the model used by the Traffic Director for London between 1995–97, emissions of carbon dioxide on the network were approximately 2 per cent. less where red route measures had been implemented in comparison with those sections of the network that had not yet been implemented.

The Traffic Director for London monitors accidents at the end of each year. His current data on accidents show that the number of personal injury accidents on the network has reduced by 8.8 per cent. compared with a 0.5 per cent. reduction on other roads in London.

Railway Accidents

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the railway accidents in each year between 1989 and 1999, giving the numbers of fatalities and those injured in each accident. [100188]

Mr. Hill: The information is not available in the form requested.

Comprehensive statistics relating to all railway accidents in Great Britain can be found in the Health and Safety Executive's HM Chief Inspector of Railways' Annual Reports on Railway Safety. Latest statistics for 1998–99 are due to be published on 2 December. These figures include an analysis of the number of train accidents, by causation, and the total number of fatalities and injuries each year. The analysis of fatalities and injuries is by type of accident and identity of the person involved, e.g. passenger, member of railway staff. Arrangements are being made for copies of the Annual Report to be available in the House Libraries once published. Copies of previous Annual Reports are already in the House Libraries.

Bus Services (Regulation)

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce regulation for bus services. [99866]

Mr. Hill: We will be including measures in the forthcoming Transport Bill to fulfil our manifesto commitment to the proper regulation of buses at the local level. We expect to make a further announcement shortly.

Railway Maintenance Staff

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each year since 1979 for which figures are available the number of maintenance staff who were *(a)* killed and *(b)* injured on the railway network. [100058]

Mr. Hill: The information is not available in the detail requested, although there are statistics on the total number of railway staff killed and injured in the period in question, as set out in the table. "Railway staff" includes all rail workers (drivers, station staff etc.) as well as maintenance staff.

Casualties to all railway staff in the last 20 years

Year	*Fatalities*	*Major injuries*	*Minor injuries*
1979	43		[1]6,122
1980	32	611	4,591
1981	27	192	4,591
1982	27	137	3,816
1983	28	161	3,010
1984	25	127	2,544
1985	25	166	2,551
1986	16	175	2,733
1987	16	238	2,672
1988	16	273	3,022
1989	18	277	2,858
1990	22	306	3,051
1991–92	17	278	3,226
1992–93	11	284	3,348
1993–94	8	262	3,590
1994–95	9	252	3,411
1995–96	5	225	4,144
1996–97	2	310	1,842
1997–98	3	351	2,088
1998–99	4	376	2,070

[1] Major and minor injuries combined in 1979

Track Identification

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the advantages and disadvantages in terms of rail safety of changing the system of track identification from the current up and down system to numbering each track. [100060]

Mr. Hill: The convention adopted for identifying railway tracks varies from location to location and is the result of historic custom and practice. While it may seem attractive to impose a rationalised uniform system of identification, the risks involved in the transition could outweigh the benefits of the change. Safe operation of the railway often depends on drivers, signallers and other workers correctly identifying tracks; acquiring the necessary knowledge of the geography and layout of the railway is an important part of ensuring their competence. Change to weil-established names could well increase the probability of errors.

Victorian Parks

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to take action to improve the state of Victorian parks in Britain, in response to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee's report of Session 1998–99 on Town and Country Parks (HC 477). [100281]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We welcome the recent report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee on Town and Country Parks. We share the Committee's concern about the quality and future of Victorian parks. We will publish our full response to the report in the new year.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the Government's carbon dioxide emission targets for *(a)* 2011, *(b)* 2012, *(c)* 2014, *(d)* 2016, *(e)* 2018 and *(f)* 2020. [100481]

Mr. Hill: Following Kyoto in 1997, the UK has a target to reduce a basket of 6 greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide, by 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2008–12. The Government also have a domestic goal to cut emissions of carbon dioxide by 20 per cent. by 2010. The Kyoto protocol requires international discussions about targets beyond 2012 to begin by 2005 at the latest.

The Government will shortly be publishing a draft UK climate change programme for consultation. The draft programme will recognise that Kyoto is only the start of the process and that greater cuts in emissions will be needed over time. It will therefore set out our policies and measures directed at our current commitments, but also to help prepare the UK for more challenging targets in the future.

Gipsy Caravans

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many gipsy caravans were counted in each local authority area in the January and July counts of *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; and how many of those caravans were parked on unauthorised sites; [100485]

(2) what is his current estimate of the number of *(a)* gipsy caravans and *(b)* other travellers' vehicles in England. [100486]

Mr. Mullin: The figures for the latest five counts of gipsy caravans broken down by local authority are routinely placed in the Libraries of both Houses as soon as they become available. They include details of the numbers of gipsy caravans on authorised (public and private) sites and on unauthorised sites in every local authority area. Figures for January 1997 to January 1999 are included in the table which was published in May this year, and the figures for July 1997 to July 1999 are included in the table which was published in October this year.

At the time of the count of gipsy caravans in July this year, there was a total of 13,399 gipsy caravans on authorised (public and private) sites and on unauthorised sites in England. Gipsies are defined in legislation as

"persons of nomadic habit of life, whatever their race or origin".

The Department does not keep records of the number of vehicles belonging to other travellers who do not fall within that definition.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will reply to the letter of 26 July from the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Montgomery. [100400]

Ms Armstrong: We have no record of receiving the right hon. Members' letter dated 26 July. If he would like to forward a further copy it will be dealt with promptly.

Westminster Underground

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when Westminster underground station will be open to Jubilee Line services. [100438]

Mr. Hill: London Transport aim to open the Jubilee Line station at Westminster shortly before Christmas. It is, however, a very deep and highly complex station, being constructed on an extremely constricted site. LT cannot therefore guarantee the opening date at present. By early December it should be possible to be more precise.

Farm-based Tourism

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent guidance he has issued to planning authorities with regard to farm-based tourism and other farm diversification projects; and when such guidance was issued. [100274]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) note 7 on the Countryside recognises the importance of farm-based diversification in a changing rural economy and gives guidance on development related to agriculture and to farm diversification, including tourism. The guidance takes account of the research report "Planning for Rural Diversification", published in 1995, which was accompanied by a good practice guide.

Rating Revaluation

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that, during the revaluation of non-domestic properties from 1 April 2000, unqualified rating advisers are not able to conduct business. [100268]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Non-domestic ratepayers must remain free to engage the services of anyone they wish. However, they should be aware that unscrupulous operators are active in this field and may not offer a fully professional service.

Members of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the Incorporated Society of Valuers and Auctioneers (ISVA) and the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation (IRRV), are regulated by rules of professional conduct designed to protect the public from misconduct, and are required to hold adequate professional indemnity insurance.

Before employing a rating adviser who is not a member of one of these bodies, ratepayers should satisfy themselves that he or she has the necessary knowledge and experience, as well as appropriate indemnity insurance.

My Department will be strongly reinforcing this message in the run up to the revaluation. It will be included in the information that we intend should be sent to all ratepayers early next year.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how agreements entered into by trade associations with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions for the purpose of securing 80 per cent. climate change levy discount will be enforced against members of such trade associations. [100460]

Mr. Mullin: The agreements are not intended to be legally binding upon members of trade associations or any other entities which the associations may represent. The agreements are a mechanism by which, if environmental targets are met, a reduction in the climate change levy will be made. It is this incentive which will deliver the necessary environmental outcome in the public interest.

Local Government (Finance)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those local authorities which have negative housing subsidy; and if he will set out in respect of each authority the sum being transferred this year from the Housing Revenue Account to the General Fund and the value of the transfer as expressed in Band D Council Tax per taxpayer. [100318]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* The latest information we have on the authorities that are expected to be in "negative housing subsidy" for 1999–2000 is shown in the table.

Authority	*Forecast of the amount transferring from the Housing Revenue Account to the authority's General Fund in 1999–2000 (£000)*	*Value of the transfer expressed as Band D Council Tax per taxpayer (£)*
Allerdale	73	2
Aylesbury	2,549	42
Bath UA	2,848	47
Bedford	904	18
Bexley	5,193	64
Blaby	345	12
Bracknell Forest	6,732	164
Bromley	4,382	34
Bromsgrove	432	13
Cherwell	2,352	53
Corby	22	1
Crawley	4,991	146
Dacorum	7,586	141
Dartford	624	21
Daventry	1,559	63
East Devon	1,117	22
East Hertfordshire	1,366	26
East Lindsey	1,047	25
East Northamptonshire	275	11
Eastleigh	556	14
Eden	634	35
Epping Forest	658	13

Authority	Forecast of the amount transferring from the Housing Revenue Account to the authority's General Fund in 1999–2000 (£000)	Value of the transfer expressed as Band D Council Tax per taxpayer (£)
Epsom and Ewell	1,031	35
Forest Heath	920	62
Harlow	3,307	125
Hertsmere	2,203	57
IOW Council	1,039	21
Isles of Scilly	42	39
Lichfield	1,106	33
Mid Bedfordshire	2,684	61
Mole Valley	579	15
North Hertfordshire	588	13
Reigate and Banstead	1,289	24
Rother	731	20
Runnymede	862	27
South Bucks	1,039	34
South Cambridgeshire	1,685	33
South Hams	1,309	39
South Lakeland	70	2
South Northamptonshire	1,469	53
South Oxfordshire	3,880	75
South Somerset	1,850	35
St. Albans	848	15
St. Edmundsbury	1,823	54
Staffs Moorlands	182	6
Stevenage	2,390	90
Suffolk Coastal	1,026	24
Swale	1,595	39
Tandridge	1,083	31
Telford	1,211	27
Tewkesbury	591	21
Three Rivers	462	13
Uttlesford	1,490	52
Watford	714	24
Waverley	108	2
Welwyn Hatfield	3,678	97
West Berkshire	1,013	18
West Devon	483	28
West Oxfordshire	1,731	47
Worthing	509	14

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the local authority capping system in relation to housing benefit. [100093]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* My Department will be consulting shortly on the detail of the proposals for changes in the housing revenue account subsidy regime. Consideration of the outcome of that exercise will be required before any decisions are taken. It is too early to say what the impact of any changes will be.

Local Government (Structure)

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he next plans to review the structure of local government in England; and if he will make a statement. [100787]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) on 1 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 12W.

Agricultural Land

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to protect high-grade agricultural land from development; and if he will make a statement. [100578]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government's Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) note 7 on the countryside gives detailed advice on development affecting agricultural land. Local planning authorities should take account of the quality of any agricultural land that would be lost through development proposals, both when preparing their development plans and when considering planning applications.

Planning Policy Guidance

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the response to the consultation on the revised draft PPG 3 on Housing; and when he expects to publish the new guidance. [100577]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department received over 600 responses to the consultation on the draft new PPG3 on Housing, in addition to a report from the Environment, Transport and the Regional Affairs Committee. The final version of PPG3 will be published in the New Year.

Council Housing

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to change the rules and financial arrangements of the large-scale voluntary transfer scheme for council houses; and if he will make a statement. [100096]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* We have recently proposed several changes to the rules and financial arrangements of the large-scale voluntary transfer programme. Details are set out below:

proposals to help authorities whose capital receipt after transfer would be insufficient to cover all of their housing debt;

moving away from the current system of running an annual programme to one which gives authorities greater flexibility;

changes to the way in which the LSVT levy is calculated.

In addition, we recently announced that authorities may capitalise the cost of higher rent expenditure for up to three years after transfer, thereby reducing the cost to their general fund.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy on large-scale voluntary transfer of council houses; what assistance his Department gives to councils considering such a scheme; and if he will make a statement. [100094]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* We are keen for local authorities to pursue transfer where it is clearly part of their housing strategy and will improve the living conditions of tenants and the service they receive. However, authorities are under no compulsion to transfer their stock. My Department publishes guidance for local authorities which are considering transferring their stock.

Out-of-town Shopping

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Government policy on out-of-town shopping development. [99023]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government's policy on out-of-town shopping development was set out in our response to the House of Commons Environment Committee report on shopping centres in July 1997 [CMND 3729], in which we reaffirmed our commitment to planning policy guidance note 6 (PPG6) on town centres and retail developments, and was subsequently reiterated in the Opposition Day debate on 24 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 1350–56, and in further evidence to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee on 27 October this year.

Carbon Dioxide

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has had from the IEA Greenhouse Gas Research and Development Programme on the technology of carbon dioxide capture and sequestration. [99442]

Mr. Meacher: The Government help to fund the IEA Greenhouse Gas R&D Programme under contract with the DTI. DETR receives all reports produced under this contract.

DETR also commissioned the IEA Greenhouse Gas R&D Programme to contribute to a report on carbon sequestration submitted to the Panel on Sustainable Development.

British Railways Board

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the British Railways Board concerning the planned disposal of the board's land holdings. [100679]

Mr. Hill: In July last year the Government announced a suspension of sales of British Rail property pending a review of it by the BR Board. Following the review, the Government have agreed with the Chairman of the BR Board (now part of the shadow Strategic Rail Authority) the lifting of the sales suspension and the introduction of new marketing procedures for the disposal of its land holdings which will give priority to transport use. BR's "Marketing Process" document which gives further details is available in the House Library.

Railtrack (Advertising Revenue)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the arrangements whereby Railtrack receives revenue from advertising hoardings which were previously in the ownership of British Rail. [100680]

Mr. Hill: This is a commercial matter for Railtrack.

Environment Agency

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the results of the current consultation upon the performance of the Environment Agency. [100142]

Mr. Mullin: My Department is not currently consulting upon the performance of the Environment Agency.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals the Government have for the future of the Environment Agency. [100143]

Mr. Mullin: As part of the Government's programme of regular five-yearly financial management and policy reviews of non-departmental public bodies, my Department will be conducting a thorough review of the Environment Agency next year, in conjunction with MAFF and the National Assembly for Wales.

Trains (Bicycle Facilities)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with the train operating companies about facilities for bicycles on trains. [100693]

Mr. Hill: The Secretary of State has not held discussions with the train operating companies about facilities for bicycles on trains. On 29 September he issued the Franchising Director with new Instructions and Guidance (copy in the House Library) which ask him to promote the use of bicycles by seeking the provision of reasonable facilities on board new rolling stock and at stations. The Franchising Director's staff hold discussions about bicycle provision with train operating companies whenever new rolling stock is ordered.

Information Technology

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the *(a)* costs and *(b)* time scales of IT projects which are being undertaken by his Department; if he will list the (i) start date, (ii) planned completion date, (iii) expected completion date, (iv) planned cost and (v) current estimated cost of these projects; and if he will make a statement. [100795]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 22 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 21W. The information requested is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Ferry Services (Passenger Registration)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what representations he has received in relation to the introduction of full passenger registration systems on small ferry services; [98659]

(2) what assessment he has made of how small ferry services will meet full passenger registration regulations. [98660]

Mr. Hill: Following political agreement to the EC Directive 98/41, a working group was set up with representatives of all sectors of the passenger ship industry to discuss how the Directive could be implemented. The industry urged flexibility, and the UK regulations were accordingly drafted to allow operators the freedom to determine the particular arrangements to be used for counting and registration, provided that those arrangements comply with the terms of the Directive.

My Department also formally consulted the industry on the draft regulations, which would transpose the Directive into UK law. Representations were received from the following in response to the consultation exercise, and were taken into account before the national regulations were made on 30 June 1999:

British Ports Association
Caledonian MacBrayne
Central Scotland Passenger Vessel Association
Chamber of Shipping
Confederation of Passenger Transport
NUMAST
National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers
Orkney Islands Council
Passenger Shipping Association
Road Haulage Association
Seafrance
Shetland Islands Council
South Coast Passenger Vessel Operators Association
The UK Major Ports Group Ltd.
Waverley Excursions Ltd.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the financial implications of the full passenger registration system for small ferry companies. [98661]

Mr. Hill: Most small ferry companies are unaffected because they do not operate in waters to which the directive applies the registration system. A compliance cost assessment was prepared while directive 98/41 was being negotiated. The estimated total cost to those British shipping lines and ports affected was around £6 million for the initial capital cost of implementation, with annual revenue of around £2.5 million. These estimates were based on information provided by the shipping industry. Copies of the compliance cost assessment are in the House Library.

Capper Pass and Son Ltd.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps the Health and Safety Executive has taken to ensure that the medical records of former employees of Capper Pass and Son Ltd., working at the Capper Pass smelting plant, were retained by their parent company Rio Tinto. [100104]

Mr. Prescott: The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has not been able to identify any specific communication in its files with Capper Pass concerning the retention of medical records around the time when the Capper Pass smelter closed in 1991. The HSE doctor who dealt with Capper Pass at that time no longer works for HSE.

Duties are placed on employers in specific legislation controlling the use of lead and ionising radiation to retain certain records, and to retain certain health-related information under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1989. HSE inspectors do not routinely follow up the retention of records every time premises close.

In recent months, due to problems concerning release of the records to representatives of former employees of Capper Pass, HSE staff have communicated with Rio Tinto plc about the retention and ownership of the records. I have corresponded with Rio Tinto senior staff and have been assured that Rio Tinto's senior occupational physician is arranging for relevant medical files to be released to those acting for former employees as soon as practicable.

Motor Vehicles (Pollution)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures the Government are taking to limit pollution from motor vehicles. [99018]

Mr. Hill: The UK has played a central role in the development of tighter European vehicle emission and fuel quality standards. On a domestic level, we are encouraging the use of cleaner vehicles through fiscal incentives, the work of the cleaner vehicles task force and the Powershift programme. These measures are expected to reduce significantly the emissions from road vehicles over the next few years.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Representation of the People Bill

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment his Department has made of the effects on e-commerce and user verification of the proposals restricting access to the electoral register contained in the Representation of the People Bill. [100672]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

A regulatory impact statement relating to the Representation of the People Bill was placed in the Library on 18 November to coincide with the Bill's introduction.

Fireworks

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many reports he has received in each of the last five years of accidents caused by unsafe fireworks; and if he will make a statement. [99296]

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people have sustained injuries as a result of accidents involving fireworks in 1999. [100604]

Dr. Howells: Figures on the numbers and types of injuries caused by fireworks and treated at hospital Accident and Emergency units in England, Scotland and Wales during the four week period covering the run-up to 5 November and a few days afterwards are as follows:

	Figures
1998	831
1997	908
1996	1,233
1995	1,530
1994	1,574

The statistics do not indicate whether the injury was due to a firework malfunctioning or to misuse.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many accidents involving fireworks have been recorded in the last 12 months. [99288]

Dr. Howells: Because injuries from fireworks are concentrated in the period around 5 November, the statistics of the Home Accident Surveillance System do not provide a reliable picture of injury levels. Accordingly, my Department conducts a census of injuries requiring treatment at a hospital A & E department in England, Scotland or Wales during the four week period covering the run-up to 5 November and a few days afterwards. The results for the census for the 1999 season are not yet available but I shall publish them before spring 2000.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received in the last 12 months on the sale of fireworks. [99287]

Dr. Howells: I have received a total of 224 representations on fireworks safety matters, comprised of 104 letters from Parliamentary colleagues, 13 Parliamentary questions and 107 letters from the public.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to prevent the display of fireworks for sale until 27 December. [100608]

Dr. Howells: Following discussions with my Department, the British Pyrotechnists' Association has agreed that it will advise retailers that fireworks should be displayed for sale only from 27 December. I welcome and support the agreement because I want to avoid the possibility of people buying fireworks and storing them over the Christmas period.

Arms Exports

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the applications made for licences to export *(a)* military explosives or additives and *(b)* equipment for the production of military explosives to (i) India, (ii) the Republic of Korea, (iii) Pakistan or (iv) Singapore, indicating their outcome in each case. [99744]

Dr. Howells: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible, and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

Export Licences

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many export licences for the sale of *(a)* BAe Hawks, *(b)* Alvis Scorpion vehicles and *(c)* Tactica water cannons have been issued in 1999. [99300]

Dr. Howells: The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating; the export of "aircraft", unmanned airborne vehicles, aero-engines and "aircraft" equipment, related "goods" and components, specially designed or modified for military use is controlled under ML10; the export of ground vehicles and components thereof specially designed or modified for military use is controlled under ML6, water cannon under PL5001 and other ground vehicles under PL5031. The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 1 January 1999 and 12 November 1999, 1,850 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and 84 Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued covering the export of goods with the relevant ratings. Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings and where this is so the licence is included in the Table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Individual licences issued between 1 January 1999 and 12 November 1999 covering the export of goods with the relevant ratings

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
ML6	270	19
ML10	1,527	62
PL5001	44	0
PL5031	9	3

It would entail disproportionate cost to establish which, if any of these licences covered the export of the particular types of equipment concerned, and make any subsequent inquiries necessary under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Information on export licensing decisions in 1999, including details of the military equipment licensed, will be set out in the 1999 Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls, which will be published in due course.

This information should be considered in light of the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 307W-08W.

Copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

Consumer Products (Environmental Impact)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) pursuant to the report by the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs on Reducing the Environmental Impact of Consumer Products (HC149), what further regulatory measures he intends to take in respect of on-pack claims about the environmental impact of products; [100040]

(2) what assessment he has made of the conclusions of the report by the National Consumer Council entitled, The Green Claims Code: Is it Working? (reference PD53/B2/99). [100039]

Dr. Howells: In the White Paper "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers" (Cm4410) published in July we said that we would explore the extent to which the Director General of Fair Trading's powers under the Control of Misleading Advertisements Regulations could be used more effectively to combat misleading on-pack environmental claims. My Department and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are doing this with the trading standards service and the Office of Fair Trading (OFT). OFT is currently investigating a range of claims with a view to taking appropriate action and is using, among other sources of information, the results of the NCC shopping survey.

I was encouraged to note that the NCC report recognises that there have already been improvements in a number of sectors in the short period between

publication of the Green Claims Code and the NCC's research and I understand that the OFT's initial work has revealed that there has been some further improvement since.

Renewable Energy

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to ensure that renewable energy will not be disadvantaged under the new electricity trading arrangements. [100456]

Mrs. Liddell: DTI and Ofgem published jointly in October a Conclusions document on the New Electricity Trading Arrangements following wide consultation with the renewables generators and others. Significant steps have been taken to improve the ability of renewables generators to operate effectively and these are described in the document. The objective of the new arrangements is to establish a level playing field for all types of generation, including that from renewable sources.

The Government remain strongly committed to encouraging generation of electricity from renewable sources. I expect to announce shortly how support for renewable generation will be managed in future.

Corporate Assets

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the current value of land and property (i) in Scotland, (ii) in the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) in total within the responsibility of *(a)* the Design Council, *(b)* the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, *(c)* ACAS, *(d)* UKAEA, *(e)* the National Consumers Council, *(f)* the Gas Consumers Council and *(g)* other executive non-departmental public bodies. [99817]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The net book value of land and buildings held by the UKAEA as at 31 March 1999 was: (i) £2.6 million in Scotland, (ii) £83.5 million in the United Kingdom and (iii) nil overseas.

The Design Council, the Competition Commission (previously the Monopolies and Mergers Commission), ACAS, the National Consumers Council, the Gas Consumers Council and other executive non-departmental public bodies (other than the Research Councils) do not own land or property but rent or lease accommodation to meet their requirements.

Values for the land and property of the seven science Research councils are published in their Annual Accounts and the latest DTI Annual Expenditure Plans Report (Cm4211). As expenditure from the Science Budget is deemed to be for the benefit of the UK as a whole, data are not collected in the form requested and could be provided only at disproportion cost.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the estimated value of land and property (i) in Scotland, (ii) in the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) in total within the responsibility of *(a)* the National Weights and Measures Laboratory, *(b)* the Insolvency Service, *(c)* the Radiocommunications Agency, *(d)* the Employment Tribunals Service, *(e)* Companies House and *(f)* the Patent Office; and if he will further estimate the value of (1) plant and machinery, (2) vehicles, (3) office equipment and machinery, (4) telecommunications equipment, (5) computer equipment and systems, (6) furniture and fittings and (7) other assets for each of these bodies. [99818]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Values for the assets of my Department's Executive Agencies, including land and property, can be found in their Annual Reports and Accounts, copies of which are available in the Library of the House. Assets are broken down into broad categories as appropriate for each Agency. The breakdown of this information into the categories requested could be done only at disproportionate cost. Land and property in the United Kingdom owned by these bodies as of 31 March 1999 had a net book value of £36,679,000, of which the value of land and property in Scotland was £824,000. No DTI Agency owns land or property overseas.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the value of land and property in (i) Scotland, (ii) the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) total within the responsibility of *(a)* Magnox Electric plc, *(b)* British Nuclear Fuels plc, *(c)* the Post Office, *(d)* British Coal. [99814]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Magnox Electric plc merged with BNFL plc in 1997–98. The net book value of land and buildings of the Group as at 31 March, as included in the 1998–99 Report and Accounts, was £2,072 million. The net book value of land and buildings held by the Post Office as at 28 March, as included in its 1998–99 Report and Accounts, was £1,579 million. The geographical analysis requested could be provided only for these bodies at disproportionate cost.

British Coal has transferred its remaining land and property to the Coal authority, an executive non-departmental public body. The net book value of land and property owned by the Coal Authority as at 31 March 1999 was (i) £3.5 million in Scotland, (ii) £16.1 million in the United Kingdom and (iii) nil overseas.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate *(a)* the current value of land and buildings (including freehold, historic leasehold, and leasehold interests) in (i) Scotland, (ii) the UK, (iii) overseas and (iv) in total, and *(b)* the value of (1) office machinery and equipment, (2) telecommunications equipment, (3) computer equipment, (4) furniture and fittings, (5) scientific equipment, (6) heritage assets, (7) intangible assets, (8) long term debtors and (9) shareholdings held by his Department. [99659]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The estimate of the value of land and buildings held by this Department is:

	£
(i) Scotland	717,000
(ii) UK	25,657,000
(iii) Overseas	0
(iv) Total	25,657,000

The value of the other categories of assets requested are:

	£
(1) Office Machinery and Equipment	236,000
(2) Telecommunications Equipment	89,000
(3) Computer Equipment	3,090,000
(4) Furniture and Fittings	3,127,000
(5) Scientific Equipment	14,767,000
(6) Heritage Assets	0
(7) Intangible Assets	0
(8) Long-term debtors	12,770,000
(9) Shareholdings:	
Historic Cost	32,668,000
Market Value	29,701,000

The figures supplied for (i) to (iv), and (1) to (7) are based on current cost net book values as at 31 March 1999, after allowing for depreciation. The estimates for land and buildings include freehold and historic leasehold property but do not include buildings occupied under operating leases. Shareholdings for which no markets exists are shown at historic cost; other shareholdings are shown at market price as at 31 march 1999.

Measurement Conversion

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the conversion of measurement from imperial to metric will be finally concluded; and if he will make a statement. [99853]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Under legislation made in 1994, goods sold loose by weight—mainly fresh food—must be priced and weighed in grams and kilograms after 31 December 1999. This change will complete the metrication programme for units of measurement that are used for trade within the meaning of the Weights and Measures Act 1985.

E-commerce

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he plans to accept the proposed Article 15 of the draft Brussels Regulation on e-commerce and Article 13 of the Regulation in their current form. [100303]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* The Commission's proposals seem to go further than member states envisaged when they reviewed the Brussels Convention on jurisdiction and enforcement of judgments. We are actively discussing the implications with the Commission and other member states and we are consulting business and consumer organisations. We aim to finalise our negotiating position shortly. It is vital to accelerate the contribution of e-commerce to economic growth in the EU by agreeing as soon as possible on a legislative framework which gives maximum confidence to everyone engaged in buying and selling on-line.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to change the home country principle contained in the draft e-commerce directive to amend private international law; and what plans he has to seek changes in the use of private international law to remove barriers to the completion of the EU internal market. [100304]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* We have no plans to seek to change the country of origin in the draft e-commerce directive. In a case where rules of private international law would adversely affect the freedom to provide information society services in the internal market, the country of origin principle would take precedence. We support this general approach and the proposed exceptions to it, such as for contractual obligations concerning certain consumer contracts. As regards rules of private international law, the Government are considering the Commission's proposals to convert the Brussels Convention, concerning choice of jurisdiction, into a Community Regulation. A revision of the Rome Convention, concerning applicable law, may begin next year.

Private Recruitment Industry

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many cases have been reported to his Department of individuals who remain unemployed as a result of temp-to-perm arrangements operating within the private recruitment industry. [100302]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* There is no obligation to report such cases to my Department and we do not maintain a systematic record of those cases coming to our attention.

National Health Service Patient Data

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health on making National Health Service patient data available to industry for the purposes of research. [99757]

Mr. Byers: I have not had any discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health on this matter.

Maternity Leave

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many homes in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire will benefit from the increase in maternity leave under the Employment Relations Act 1999 and its associated regulations; and if he will make a statement. [100598]

Mr. Alan Johnson: No information is available at this level of geographical detail. However, nationally 2.8 million female employees under 40 could benefit from the increase in statutory maternity leave should they become pregnant, and 1 million from the wider entitlement to additional maternity leave should they become pregnant. In the West Midlands there are 256,000 female employees under 40 who would benefit from the increase in statutory maternity leave should they become pregnant and 82,000 who would benefit from the wider entitlement to additional maternity leave should they become pregnant.

Ice Cream Industry

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to receive the Competition Commission's report into the ice cream industry; and if he will publish his Department's response. [100678]

Mr. Byers: The Competition Commission report on impulse ice cream was delivered on 21 September. The report, and any decisions made on it, will be published as soon as practicable.

Carbon Emissions

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the potential of photovoltaics to reduce carbon emissions. [99029]

Mrs. Liddell: The technical potential for building integrated PV in the UK is currently estimated at 15 terrawatt hours (TWh), which represents less than 5 per cent. of current electricity consumption. The potential savings in CO2 emissions if all this resource could be utilised, which is unlikely for practical, economic and environmental reasons, would amount to some 7 million tonnes per year.

The average cost of electricity from building integrated PV is currently around six times that of electricity generated from conventional fuels, and is unlikely to decrease sufficiently over the next ten years to make more than a small contribution to the carbon emission reductions necessary by 2012. The current annual generating capacity of installed PV in the UK is some 0.5 gigawatt hours (GWh).

However, in the longer term, PV has the potential to make a significant contribution to carbon savings. The DTI has been supporting a programme of research, development and demonstration of the technology in the UK for several years and, together with support from the European Union, a number of major examples on building intergrated photovoltaics are now operating.

Miners (Health Claims)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many of the claims received from ex-miners in Scotland for chronic bronchitis and emphysema have been fully processed; and how many claimants have died before their claims were fully processed. [100270]

Mrs. Liddell: As at 22 November, the Department had made 133 full and final payments to Scottish ex-miners, totalling some £218,000. Prior to the signing of the Handling Agreement for England and Wales on 24 September, we had commenced discussions with Scottish solicitors to adapt the Agreement to take into consideration the differences between English and Welsh, and Scottish law. The Department expects to sign an agreement with Scottish solicitors shortly and this will enable the number of offers to increase.

As at 24 November IRISC, the Department's claims handler, had been informed of 217 claims where the date of death recorded occurred since their date of claim.

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* miners and *(b)* retired miners have died before receiving full compensation payments from public funds for chronic respiratory diseases in the last 12 months. [99856]

Mrs. Liddell: As at 24 November IRISC, the Department's claims handler, had been informed of 1,896 claims where the date of death recorded occurred in the last 12 months. One of these claims was in respect of a currently employed minor. It is not known how many of these claims would have qualified for full compensation under the Handling Agreement concluded on 24 September 1999.

The contract to carry out the medical assessments of live and deceased claims which will form the basis for paying full compensation where appropriate was let on 5 October. Where claims are progressed by an estate or dependant they will be assessed under the Handling Agreement.

WTO Seattle Round

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received on export subsidies to developing countries in relation to the forthcoming World Trade Organisation Round. [100422]

Mr. Caborn: I have received a large number of representations about this issue in the run up to the WTO Ministerial meeting in Seattle, particularly in relation to agricultural trade. I have made clear my support for a substantial reduction in these trade distorting subsidies as part of a new Trade Round.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to raise the issue of zero tariffs for developing countries at the World Trade Organisation Conference in Seattle. [100425]

Mr. Caborn: At Seattle, I shall be pressing for other industrialised countries to support the proposal agreed within the EU to provide duty-free access for essentially all products from the least developed countries no later than the end of the new Round of negotiations (2003). More generally, the Government will continue to call for zero tariffs to be applied to all goods from the least developed countries, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister promised in his speech at Mansion House on 22 November.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received relating to the position adopted by the European Union on the labelling of genetically modified foods in advance of the World Trade Organisation Conference in Seattle. [100424]

Mr. Caborn: I have received a number of representations on the subject of labelling of genetically modified food and on other aspects of labelling, both in writing and when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have met representatives of the civil society in person, in advance of the World Trade Organisation conference in Seattle on 29 November-3 December.

The Government share the EU objective to seek clarification of the terms of the WTO Agreement as concerns labelling, so that it is clear that labelling requirements can be used as a means of responding to consumer demands for information, where appropriate and without placing excessive burdens on, and unfairly restricting, export opportunities for our trading partners. On the specific question of genetically modified food, the Government are committed to labelling where there are measurable differences between GM and non-GM products, to allow consumers to make informed choices.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations the Government will make at the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Seattle to other industrialised countries concerning the implementation of agreements to reduce trade barriers to developing countries; and if he will make a statement. [100813]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will urge others to join the UK and EU in indicating strong support for the implementation of agreements to reduce trade barriers to developing countries, both in respect of those commitments entered into as part of the Uruguay Round, and in respect of new initiatives, such as the EU proposal that all industrialised countries should agree to provide duty-free access for essentially all goods from the Least Developed Countries no later than the end of the next round of negotiations (2003).

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will raise the matter of labour standards in developing countries at the Seattle Conference of the World Trade Organisation. [100426]

Mr. Caborn: The Government are firmly committed to securing the EU proposals on trade and labour, including the creation of a Joint ILO/WTO Standing Working Forum on trade, globalisation and labour issues.

Intellectual Property Agreement

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received about the World Trade Organisation's Trade-Related Intellectual Property Agreement. [100427]

Mr. Caborn: Ministers and officials have received many representations about the WTO's TRIPS agreement. Many of these have been supportive of that Agreement and its implementation in view of its importance to encourage investment. Some have questioned whether parts of the Agreement might be detrimental to development interests. We have given assurances that there is much flexibility in the TRIPS agreement to allow for development interests to be taken into account.

Cause-related Marketing

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received in relation to cause-related marketing techniques; and if he will introduce legislative provisions to prevent the abuse of such techniques. [99391]

Dr. Howells: I have not received any representations about cause-related marketing and I have no plans to introduce additional regulation in this area, which is already subject to general legal controls on, for example, misleading advertisements, and to the codes of practice overseen by the Advertising Standards Authority and the broadcast regulators.

Third World Debt

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list by country the value of the outstanding debts on *(a)* United Kingdom aid loans and *(b)* loans guaranteed by the British Government through the Export Credits Guarantee Department, showing separately the amount that is classified as (i) pre-cut-off date and (ii) post-cut-off date, for each of the countries defined by the World Bank as developing countries. [100020]

Mr. Caborn: From the information available, Annexe A shows the value of outstanding amounts in respect of United Kingdom aid loans and Annexe B the outstanding value of unrecovered claims under guarantees issued through the Export Credits Guarantee Department to Developing Markets. The ECGD data are divided into amounts paid as claims which remain outstanding but which have been officially rescheduled, and claims paid that are not yet subject to a rescheduling agreement. All the amounts that have been rescheduled are in respect of pre-cut-off business, but amounts outstanding which are not subject to rescheduling are likely to include both pre and post cut off amounts. ECGD is not readily able to split these data on a pre and post cut off basis.

Annexe A:

Balance outstanding under Direct Bilateral Capital Aid agreements

£

Country	*Balance at 31 March 1999*
Afghanistan	66,670.00
Antigua and Barbuda 1991	2,044,168.17
Bangladesh	292,451.32
Barbados	136,070.30
Belize	12,270,757.44
Botswana	153,769.08
Brazil	1,692,335.68
Cameroon	—
Cayman Islands 1975/1	174,037.49
Columbia	169,867.19
Costa Rica	765,798.46
Cyprus	130,774.00
Dominica	5,788,731.80
Ecuador	7,539,648.69
Egypt	3,363,360.81
Ethiopia	—
Gambia	—
Ghana	10,172,487.21
Grenada	1,429,108.50
Guyana	30,155,434.73
Honduras	1,911,143.04
India	2,432,000.00
Indonesia	—
Ivory Coast	2,115,892.38
Jamaica	32,994,877.44
Jordan	20,019,655.10
Laos	1,275.00
Malawi	396,000.00
Malaysia	2,879,159.31
Mauritius	438,250.22
Mozambique 1976	3,408,903.92
Nicaragua	398,200.00
Nigeria	4,233,084.04
Pakistan	750,664.58
Paraguay	1,759,500.00
Peru	5,170,602.44
Philippines	2,397,068.00
Senegal	272,329.67
Seychelles	7,885,673.72
Sierra Leone	—
Solomon Islands 1981	1,844,700.15
Sri Lanka	76,200.17
St. Kitts	2,734,970.00
St. Lucia	2,499,500.00
St. Vincent	3,289,200.00
Sudan	—
Swaziland	1,537,779.89
Tonga	240,202.80

Balance outstanding under Direct Bilateral Capital Aid agreements

£

Country	Balance at 31 March 1999
Tunisia	22,726,151.73
Turkey	1,421,260.87
TCI	33,309,320.27
Zambia	—
W. Samoa	10,917,268.70
Zimbabwe	
Total Bilateral	246,406,304.31

Balance outstanding under aid loans made via ECGD

ECGD	£
Liberia	77,749.58
Nigeria	672,000.00
Total	749,749.58

Balance outstanding under aid loans made via multilateral institutions

Multilateral	£
Turkey	15,107,325.62
EEC/IDA	57,190,198.17
EEC/EIB	336,099,288.37
CDB	834,817.19
Total	409,231,629.35

Annexe B:

ECGD unrecovered claim to developing markets as at 31 March 1999

£

	Claims paid: which have not been rescheduled	Claims paid: which have been rescheduled	Total
Highly Indebted Poor countries			
Angola	4.52	52.23	56.75
Burkina Faso	0.00	0.57	0.57
Burundi	0.00		0.00
Cameroon	2.73	33.83	36.56
Central African Republic	0.00	0.25	0.25
Congo	0.14	58.08	58.22
Congo (Dr)	9.92	41.47	51.39
Cote d'Ivoire	16.22	11.83	28.05
Ethiopia	3.03	11.61	14.64
Ghana	0.07	2.09	2.16
Guinea	0.00	1.44	1.44
Guinea Bissau	0.00		0.00
Guyana	0.04	13.95	13.99
Haiti	0.00		0.00
Honduras	0.00		0.00
Liberia	2.50	6.52	9.02
Madagascar	0.00	14.80	14.80
Malawi	4.01	0.69	4.70
Mali	0.00	3.87	3.87
Mauritania	0.00	4.61	4.61
Mozambique	0.00	35.93	35.93
Myanmar	23.07		23.07
Nicaragua	0.00	0.40	0.40
Niger	0.00	5.41	5.41
Nigeria	22.42	1,843.10	1,865.52
Rwanda	0.10		0.10
Sao Tome	0.00		0.00
Sierra Leone	0.00	1.04	1.04
Somalia	0.14	12.18	12.32
Sudan	3.41	126.07	129.48
Tanzania	0.03	32.40	32.43
Uganda	0.00	2.49	2.49
Vietnam	0.00	5.84	5.84
Yemen Republic	0.17	3.08	3.25
Zambia	0.16	101.31	101.47
Moderately Indebted Low Income countries			
Bangladesh	0.00		0.00
Benin	0.08	2.53	2.61
Cambodia	0.00		0.00
Chad	0.00		0.00
Comoras	0.00		0.00
Gambia	0.06		0.06
India	2.50		2.50
Kenya	2.02	32.90	34.92
Lao PDR	0.00		0.00
Pakistan	0.26		0.26
Senegal	0.02	0.80	0.82
Togo	0.37	9.11	9.48
Zimbabwe	0.32		0.32
Severely Indebted Middle Income countries			
Argentina	6.87	50.99	57.86
Bolivia	0.02	8.99	9.01
Brazil	1.95	380.58	382.53
Bulgaria	0.02	11.39	11.41
Cuba	24.55	27.96	52.51
Ecuador	0.18	31.96	32.14
Gabon	0.00	83.10	83.10
Indonesia	86.85		86.85
Iraq	625.05		625.05
Jamaica	0.67	2.23	2.90
Jordan	19.37	311.19	330.56
Peru	0.14	87.13	87.27
Syrian Arab Republic	0.05		0.05
Moderately Indebted Middle Income countries			
Algeria	4.37	166.49	170.86
Chile	0.11		0.11
Colombia	0.08		0.08
Georgia	0.00		0.00
Hungary	0.02		0.02
Macedonia	0.00	3.51	3.51
Malaysia	0.02		0.02
Mexico	24.68	65.79	90.47
Morocco	0.09	48.70	48.79
Panama	–0.11		–0.11
Philippines	9.31	20.07	29.38
St. Vincent	0.00		0.00
Thailand	0.26		0.26
Tunisia	0.00		0.00
Turkey	0.00		0.00
Uruguay	0.00		0.00
Venezuela	0.31		0.31
Severely Indebted Low Income countries			
Afghanistan	0.00		0.00
Burundi	0.00		0.00
Laos	0.00		0.00
Liberia	0.00		0.00

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Falklands

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will request a contribution from Argentina towards the cost of clearing landmines in the Falkland Islands. [R] [100016]

Mr. Battle: In December 1993, the Argentine Government offered to meet the cost of clearing landmines in the Falkland Islands. We welcomed this offer and sought to explore it further.

During President Menem's visit to the UK in October 1998, we agreed as a first step to work with Argentina to evaluate the feasibility and cost of clearing the landmines still present in the Falkland Islands. Work on a Memorandum of Understanding setting out how this feasibility study will be carried out is under way. Both Governments reaffirmed their commitment to co-operate on mine clearance in the Joint Statement of 14 July 1999.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his estimate is of the number of Argentine landmines remaining in the Falklands Islands. [R] [100015]

Mr. Battle: The Ministry of Defence estimate that around 16,600 mines remain in the Falkland Islands. The Argentine armed forces laid 127 minefields on the Falklands in 1982. MOD estimate that 18,000 mines of all types were laid, including 14,000 anti-personnel mines. British forces carried out some clearance immediately after the conflict, lifting about 1,400 mines, but stopped after several injuries to those involved. The remaining 101 minefields are marked and fenced, and therefore not an immediate hazard. The garrison conduct a public campaign to warn of the dangers. They make regular patrols and destroy mines which become exposed on the surface of the ground. The Argentines have given us their minefield records.

The Argentine Government offered to assist with their clearance, and during President Menem's visit to the UK in October 1998 we agreed, as a first step, to work with Argentina to evaluate the feasibility and cost of clearing them. Work on a Memorandum of Understanding on how this study will be carried out is under way. Both Governments restated their commitment to co-operate on mine clearance in the Joint Statement of 14 July 1999.

We are fully committed to the Ottawa Convention, which requires us to clear all anti-personnel mines from the Falkland Islands within 10 years of entry, unless we can show good reasons why an extension should be granted. Such reasons may include humanitarian, environmental and technical considerations. Mine clearance in the Falkland Islands is both difficult and dangerous and we shall be keeping these points in mind.

Corporate Assets

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the current estimated value of assets relating to *(a)* Wilton Park Executive Agency and *(b)* the British Council (i) in Scotland, (ii) in the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) in total. [99784]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The value of assets relating to the Wilton Park Executive Agency is £1,270,000. The current estimated values of the British Council's assets are £652,000 in Scotland, £8,170,000 in the rest of the United Kingdom (not including the figure for Scotland) and £83,633,000 overseas. The total value of the British Council's assets is £92,455,000.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his estimate is of the value of *(a)* vehicles, *(b)* equipment, *(c)* IT, *(d)* corporate systems, *(e)* departmental systems, *(f)* overseas systems, *(g)* communications, *(h)* technical security equipment and *(i)* heritable assets in (i) Scotland, (ii) the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) in total. [99786]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The FCO has no fixed assets in Scotland. Value information for the FCO's fixed assets is being developed as part of the implementation of resource accounting. This information is currently being audited. The first set of resource accounts will be published in respect of 1999–2000.

Intergovernmental Conference

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the planned date of publication of the proposed White Paper on the forthcoming intergovernmental conference; which departments are involved in drafting it; if it will identify the issues which the Government *(a)* does and *(b)* does not want included in the agenda for the IGC; and if it will guarantee that extensions of qualified majority voting in specified areas will not be approved by the Government. [100279]

Mr. Vaz: We intend to publish the White Paper early next year, before formal IGC negotiations begin. The paper will be drafted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in consultation with other Departments. It will set out our position on all major issues expected to be discussed at the intergovernmental conference, including the possible extension of qualified majority voting.

Your Britain Your Europe

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out *(a)* the itinerary for his proposed five-day Your Britain Your Europe tour, *(b)* the aims of the tour, *(c)* the cost to the public of the tour and *(d)* what funds have been made available from the European Commission for the tour. [100280]

Mr. Vaz: The aim of the Your Britain Your Europe roadshow is to promote the benefits of the UK's membership of the EU to the people of Britain.

The costs of the roadshow are estimated at £60,000, plus accommodation and travel. No funds have been made available from the European Commission for the roadshow.

The itinerary is as follows:

Your Britain Your Europe: Mr. Vaz's Regional Roadshow (Monday 29 November to Friday 3 December 1999)

Monday 29 November—North East/Humberside

St. Joseph's School, Hebburn, South Tyneside

Tyneside Foyer—City Centre Youth, Newcastle upon Tyne

Nissan Motor Manufacturing (UK Limited), Sunderland

University of Hull, Hull

Tuesday 30 November—Yorkshire/North West/Paris

CORUS Engineering Steels, Rotherham

"Your Britain Your Europe" Seminar at Carlton Park Hotel, Rotherham

Granada Studios Tour, Manchester

Olympic House, Manchester Airport

Wednesday 1 December—Paris/London

British Embassy—Briefing with French/British Media

Eurostar

Waterloo Station

House of Commons

To Bristol

Thursday 2 December—South West/West Midlands

Kwik strip Eco Solutions, Bristol

Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Bristol

Bath Environment Centre, Bath

Bath Hilton Hotel—South West Regional Euro forum Meeting

Bath Spa Culture, Bath

University of Bath

Friday 3 December—Nuneaton/Leicester/Birmingham

King Edward VI College, Nuneaton

St. John's Primary School, Ladywood, Birmingham

BBC Pebble Mill (Ed Doolan Show live)

Richard Lawnhouse Retirement Home, Ladywood, Birmingham

Birmingham Chamber of Commerce Event

Leicester Mercury Building, Leicester

De Montfort University, Leicester.

Departmental Estate

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will estimate the current value of land and property *(a)* in Scotland, *(b)* in the United Kingdom and *(c)* overseas allocated to his core Department, including Chevening. [99836]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The FCO has no land or property in Scotland. Value information for the FCO's estate in the UK and overseas is being developed as part of the implementation of resource accounting. This information is currently being audited. The first set of resource accounts will be published in respect of 1999–2000. Chevening is owned and administered by the Chevening Estate Trust. It does not form part of the FCO's estate.

International Criminal Court

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what timetable he proposes for the publication of the draft legislation on the International Criminal Court. [100180]

Mr. Hain: Draft legislation to enable ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court will be published as soon as practicable in the course of this Parliamentary session.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which interested parties will be consulted about the draft legislation on the International Criminal Court; and if he will make a statement. [100181]

Mr. Hain: After publication of the draft legislation to ratify the International Criminal Court Statute, all Parliamentarians, organisations and individuals interested in the International Criminal Court will be given an opportunity to comment.

Export Licence (ACORD)

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the approval of an export licence for the supply of one Bedford truck to ACORD. [100909]

Mr. Hain: Following consultations with this Department and the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Trade and Industry recently issued a licence for the export of one military rated, ex-MOD Bedford truck to ACORD, a relief organisation in the Sudan. The truck will be used to distribute seed and other humanitarian aid to help alleviate the suffering in Sudan. This decision does not affect the Government's continued support for the EU Common Position on the export of arms, munitions and military equipment to Sudan.

Kosovo

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the decision was taken to withdraw the OSCE verifiers from Kosovo in March. [98558]

Mr. Vaz: The decision to withdraw the OSCE verifiers from Kosovo was made by the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Norwegian Foreign Minister Knut Vollebaek, on 19 March.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when, and in what form, he received the application that the OSCE verifiers were unable to do their job owing to the escalating violence in Kosovo before 19 March. [98559]

Mr. Vaz: The decision to withdraw the OSCE verifiers was made in Vienna on 19 March by the OSCE Chairman-in-Office following a full meeting of the Contact Group plus the then OSCE Troika (Austria, Poland) under the chairmanship of Norway, as Chairman-in-Office.

The decision to withdraw the OSCE verifiers was made in the light of the failed negotiations in Paris and, in particular, the deteriorating situation on the ground in Kosovo caused by the Serbian military offensive.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his estimate of the number of Kosovo Serbs killed in Kosovo *(a)* since 11 June and *(b)* between 23 March and 10 June. [98567]

Mr. Vaz: There have been 124 reported murders of Kosovo Serbs between KFOR's deployment on 12 June and mid-October.

There are no figures available for the number of Kosovo Serbs killed in Kosovo between 23 March 1999 and 11 June 1999, ie in the period prior to KFOR's deployment.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his estimate of the number of Kosovo Albanians killed in Kosovo between *(a)* 23 March and 10 June, *(b)* 1 January and 22 March and *(c)* since 11 June. [98568]

Mr. Vaz: We estimate that at least 10,000 Kosovo Albanian civilians were killed between June 1998 and 12 June 1999. Of these, we estimate that around 500 were killed before 20 March 1999.

There have been 135 reported murders of Kosovo Albanians between KFOR's deployment on 12 June and mid-October.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made on improving access to Kosovo through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. [100326]

Mr. Vaz: Significant delays continue to be encountered by traffic, including humanitarian aid convoys, at the major crossing point on the Kosovo/Macedonian border at Blace. The United Nations interim administration in Kosovo has set up a task force to take matters forward and negotiations continue with the Macedonian Government to relieve the bottleneck at the border.

Yugoslavia

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in what forum, and in what form, the Greek Government agreed there was a legal base for military action against Yugoslavia between March and June 1999. [98560]

Mr. Vaz: The then Secretary-General of NATO announced on 23 March that he had directed the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe to initiate air operations in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. The Secretary-General noted that his decision had been taken after extensive consultations with all the Allies, including Greece.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out the legal basis for NATO's military action in Yugoslavia between March and June 1999. [98561]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have set out the position on a number of occasions. This is that cases have arisen (as in Northern Iraq in 1991) when, in the light of all the circumstances, a limited use of force was justifiable in support of purposes laid down by the Security Council, but without the Council's express authorisation, when that was the only means to avert an immediate and overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe. Such cases would in the nature of things be exceptional and would depend on an objective assessment of the factual circumstances at the time, and on the terms of the relevant decisions of the Security Council bearing on the situation in question.

In the case of Kosovo, NATO took the view in March of this year, given the circumstances at the time, that the use of force was the only route left to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.

Policy Document No. 148 (1986)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the status of Foreign Office Policy Document No. 148 (1986). [98562]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) on 22 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 18W.

IT Projects

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the information technology projects currently being undertaken by his Department and by agencies responsible to his Department, including *(a)* the start date, *(b)* the planned completion date, *(c)* the current expected completion date, *(d)* the planned costs and *(e)* the current estimated cost; and if he will make a statement. [99672]

Mr. Battle: The FCO has under way the following IT projects:

FIRECREST—an infrastructure project to provide modern, easy to use office automation systems throughout the FCO, at home and overseas.

GTP—an integrated and managed Global Telecommunications service, being procured under PFI principles. The costs shown cover procurement only. The projected costs of FCO communications over 10 years are estimated to be £238 million.

FORTRESS—to provide desk officers with electronic delivery and access to intelligence material.

VIP—to provide an integrated visa entry clearance for Posts.

POAC—to provide a replacement accounting system for Posts.

PASSPORTS—to provide modern machine readable passport systems at major consular Posts.

PAY—to contract a replacement payroll bureau service.

INTRANET—to provide Posts and FCO UK with an Intranet.

CDB—to provide a database for Commercial Officers at Posts.

DSP—to provide Diplomatic Service Procedures in electronic form to Posts and Home Departments.

£ million

	Start date	*Planned completion date*	*Current expected completion date*	*Planned cost*	*Current estimated cost*
FIRECREST	July 1997	December 2001	December 2001	66.2	85
GTP	March 1997	August 1998	January 2000	1.9	1.9
FORTRESS	January 1998	March 1999	December 1999	3.8	3.8
VIP	December 1998	December 2000	December 2000	3.7	3.7

£ million

	Start date	Planned completion date	Current expected completion date	Planned cost	Current estimated cost
POAC	July 1997	September 1999	March 2000	3.5	4.5
PASSPORTS	January 1999	December 2001	December 2001	1.2	2.4
PAY	February 1997	July 1998	December 1999	0.5	0.6
INTRANET	March 1999	March 2000	March 2000	0.7	0.6
CDB	May 1998	January 2000	March 2000	1.0	1.0
DSP	January 1998	August 1998	December 1999	0.1	0.1

Research Studies

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the title of research studies, audits and surveys *(a)* being undertaken and *(b)* commissioned by his Department for completion within (i) 1999 and (ii) 2000, stating in each case whether and when the results are due to be published. [99674]

Mr. Hain: The information requested is not centrally recorded and covers such a wide range of activity that a comprehensive list could be compiled only at disproportionate cost. Research studies commissioned and published in 1999 or intended for publication in 2000 include:

1999

History Notes

The Zinoviev Letter

Women in Diplomacy

Focus International Papers

Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Progress Towards Democracy

Progress Towards Gender Equality

Iraq: Sanctions and the "Oil for Food" Agreement

Enlargement of the European Union

Burma: 10 Years of Repression

The International Criminal Court, Questions and Answers

Population and Development

NATO's Fiftieth Anniversary Summit

Gibraltar: Partnership for Prosperity

Kosovo: Chronology, March 1998-March 1999

The Cologne Debt Initiative

Britain and China: A Growing Partnership

The Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space

Money Laundering

East Timor: A Historical Background

Britain's Parliamentary Co-operation with Russia

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Wilton Park Papers

The United Nations in The Twenty-First Century

Building Political Stability in Sub-Saharan Africa

Diplomacy for the Twenty-First Century: 'Re-Crafting The Old Guild'

Building Bridges Between Islam and the West

Nordic and Baltic Security and Prosperity

Challenges to East Asian Security

The Search for Peace in the Middle East

Europe after Economic and Monetary Union

The Continuing threat of Nuclear Proliferation

Protecting the Environment and Sustaining Development towards a Green Millennium

Current issues in International Diplomacy and Foreign Policy—Volume I: 1999

Volume II: 2000

2000

Documents on British Policy Overseas

Series III, Volume III.

In addition, unclassified versions of some of the papers prepared by the FCO's Research Analysts in recent years will be placed on the FCO's website next year.

Audits and surveys in 1999 include the regular series of internal audits conducted by the FCO's Internal Audit department in accordance with Treasury requirements. Reports of internal audits are sent to the National Audit Office, but the details are not routinely published because to do so could harm the effective management and operations of the public service.

Departmental Reports

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the titles of departmental reports being prepared with a view to publication in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 2000, stating in each case the planned date of publication. [99673]

Mr. Hain: Consistent with current Whitehall-wide practice, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's annual Department reports are published 21 days after the spring Budget:

(a) On 30 March 1999, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office published "Foreign and Commonwealth Office—The Government's Expenditure Plans 1999–2000 to 2001–02" (CM 4209)

(b) In Spring 2000, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will publish "Foreign and Commonwealth Office—The Government's Expenditure Plans 2000–01 to 2001–02". It is not possible to specify the exact publication date until the date of the spring Budget has been decided.

Strategic Export Control

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will provide quantification of exports in the next issue of the Strategic Export Control Annual Report. [100506]

Mr. Hain: We will consider the format and content of future reports in light of responses to the first two Annual Reports, taking into account in particular the eventual

report of the Joint Inquiry being carried out by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs, Defence, Trade and Industry and International Development Committees.

Macedonia

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many applications he has received from citizens of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for visas to visit the United Kingdom in each of the past three years. [100323]

Mr. Vaz: The information requested is not collected centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the development of the United Kingdom's relations with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia since the conclusion of the war in Kosovo. [100325]

Mr. Vaz: We warmly welcomed the support given by the Macedonian Government and people during the Kosovo crisis, and we continue to work to strengthen our bilateral relations. We also welcome the opportunities provided for closer co-operation through the Stability Pact and look forward to an early start on negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement between Macedonia and the European Union. We have encouraged the Macedonian Government in their preparation of a NATO Membership Action Plan.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to allow the British Embassy in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to issue visitors visas for the United Kingdom. [100324]

Mr. Vaz: The British Embassy in Skopje will begin accepting applications for visitor visas as soon as new purpose-built premises are ready. On present plans this is likely to be around the middle of 2000.

Diplomatic Missions (Visas)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which British diplomatic missions in Europe are not allowed to issue visas to visit the United Kingdom. [100321]

Mr. Vaz: The following British diplomatic posts in Europe do not offer an entry clearance service:

Country	*Post*
France	Bordeaux
	Lille
	Lyon
	Marseille
	Strasbourg
Germany	Frankfurt
	Hamburg
	Munich
	Stuttgart
Greece	Corfu
	Heraklion
Italy	Florence
	Milan
	Naples
Portugal	Oporto
Slovenia	Ljubljana
Spain	Alicante
	Barcelona
	Bilbao
	Ibiza
	Las Palmas
	Malaga
	Palma
	Santa Cruz de Tenerife
	Seville

The following posts offer a limited service to resident members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps (including International Organisations) and officials of the host country. Other applicants for visit visas may apply at any post offering a full entry clearance service.

Country	*Post*
Germany	Berlin
Morocco	Rabat
Netherlands	The Hague
Switzerland	Berne
Turkey	Ankara

The following posts offer a limited entry clearance service as indicated:

Country	*Post*	*Service available*
Armenia	Yerevan	Only accepts applications from Armenian nationals, diplomats representatives of major international organisations in Armenia
Azerbaijan	Baku	Accepts applications from Azeri nationals, diplomats, officials and resident third country nationals
Estonia	Tallinn	Only accepts applications from residents of Estonia
Georgia	Tbilisi	Accepts applications from Georgian nationals; diplomats; officials of international organisations; third country nationals resident in Georgia for longer than six months
Latvia	Riga	Only accepts applications from residents of Latvia
Lithuania	Vilnius	Only accepts applications from residents of Lithuania
Macedonia	Skopje	Only accepts applications from diplomats; urgent medical applications; refugee cases accepted by either UNHCR or the Home Office

No entry clearance service is available in the following countries to which non-resident British diplomatic missions are accredited:

Andorra

Moldova

Monaco

San Marino.

Angola

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent progress has been made in inhibiting the use of diamond sales for funding the war in Angola. [100671]

Mr. Hain: UN Security Council resolution 1173 of 12 June 1998 imposed a ban on the direct or indirect import from Angola of all diamonds not controlled through the Certificate of Origin regime of the Government of Unity and National Reconciliation of Angola (GURN). The aim was to cut off diamond revenues to UNITA, and so reduce their ability to fund continued fighting. Following the adoption of the resolution, the Government amended the Open General Import Licence to prohibit the import into the UK of diamonds exported from Angola not accompanied by a GURN Certificate or Origin. The ban is implemented in the Overseas Territories through the Angola (United Nations Sanctions) (Dependent Territories) Order 1998.

This corrects information in a previous written answer to my hon. Friend on how the UK implements its obligations under resolution 1173 with regard to the import of diamonds—3 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 189W. I would like to take this opportunity to apologise to my hon. Friend for that error.

UN Security Council resolution 1237 of 7 May 1999 established a panel of experts to investigate alleged violations of the sanctions against UNITA, in support of the work on the UN Angola Sanctions Committee. Panel members are paying a series of visits to the region, and will report on how sanctions in relation to UNITA diamonds can be implemented and enforced more effectively.

We welcomed the announcement by De Beers on 5 October that they will no longer purchase any Angolan diamonds, and will urge their clients to adopt a similar policy. In this task I want to see full co-operation from trading centres such as New York, Antwerp and Tel Aviv and also from other diamond companies to follow De Beers' lead. This is vital to disabling UNITA's murderous war effort.

TREASURY

Annual Migration (South-East)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the annual net migration into the south-east region from each of the other regions of England. [99036]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Crispin Blunt, dated 30 November 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about the estimated net annual migration into the South East Region from each of the other regions of England.

The latest figures available relate to 1998. The attached table shows the inflow, outflow and balance for migration into and out of the South East with respect to each of the other regions of England.

The estimates of internal population movements are based on the movement of NHS doctors' patients between the former Family Health Services Authority Areas. They should not be regarded as a perfect measure of migration as there is variation in the delay between a person moving and registering with a new doctor. Additionally, some moves may not result in a re-registration: for example, individuals may migrate again before registering with a doctor. Conversely, there may be others who move and re-register several times a year.

Movements into and out of the South East Government Office Region for the Year ending December 1998
Crown copyright

Thousand

Region	*Inflow*	*Outflow*	*Balance*
England	217.9	198.7	19.2
North East	5.2	4.6	0.6
North West (including Merseyside)	14.6	12.9	1.8
Yorkshire and the Humber	11.7	11.3	0.3
East Midlands	15.3	18.6	–3.3
West Midlands	15.1	15.1	—
East	30.6	29.4	1.2
London	89.5	59.8	29.7
South West	36.0	47.1	–11.1

Winter Deaths

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many deaths of *(a)* people aged 60 to 74 years, *(b)* people aged 75 to 84 years, *(c)* people aged over 85 years and *(d)* in total, in England and Wales, were attributed wholly or partly to hypothermia in 1998. [100478]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Eddie O'Hara, dated 30 November 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking how many deaths were attributed wholly or partly to hypothermia in 1998.

The information requested is given in the table below.

Deaths attributed to Hypothermia, England and Wales, 1998

	60–74	*75–84*	*85+*	*All ages*
Hypothermia	72	115	111	352

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people died in England and Wales in winter 1998–99 *(a)* aged 60 to 74 years, *(b)* aged 75 to 84 years, *(c)* aged over 85 years and *(d)* in total; and what was the average number of deaths in winter in each category over the last 10-year period. [100479]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Eddie O'Hara, dated 30 November 1995:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking how many people died in England and Wales in winter 1998–99.

The information requested is given in the table below, using the standard ONS definition of winter being December to March.

Winter deaths, England and Wales

Age	*Winter 1998–99*	*Average 1993–94 to 1997–98*
60–74	51,750	55,759
75–84	72,557	70,261
85+	69,888	60,423
All ages	216,653	209,171

Figures for monthly deaths are only readily available from 1993 onwards. Deaths are only averaged therefore for the five winters from 1993–94 to 1997–98.

Cigarette Consumption

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what proportion of family expenditure in each income decile of households is represented by cigarette consumption; [99908]

(2) what proportion of expenditure of different types of households in the lowest income decile goes on cigarette consumption. [99910]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. David Willetts, dated 30 November 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary questions on cigarette consumption.

The Family Expenditure Survey shows the proportion of family expenditure in each income decile in 1998–99 as follows:

Gross income decile group	*Percentage of total expenditure on cigarettes*
Lowest ten per cent.	3
Second decile group	3
Third decile group	3
Fourth decile group	2
Fifth decile group	2
Sixth decile group	2
Seventh decile group	2
Eighth decile group	1
Ninth decile group	1
Highest ten per cent.	1

Source:
Family Expenditure Survey 1998–99

The Family Expenditure Survey shows the proportion of expenditure of different types of households in the lowest income decile that goes on cigarette consumption in 1998–99 as follows:

Household composition	*Percentage of total expenditure on cigarettes*
One or two persons retired	2
One person not retired	3
One adult with one or more children	4

Source:
Family Expenditure Survey 1998–99

There are few non-retired households with two or more adults in the lowest income decile, so sample numbers are too small to provide the percentage for such households.

Like all estimates from sample surveys, these figures are subject to sampling variability.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the effect on the post-tax distribution of income, by decile, of the increases in tobacco duty in the budgets of 1997, 1998 and 1999 combined. [99909]

Dawn Primarolo: Information on tobacco expenditure by income decile is available in table 1.3 of the Office for National Statistics annual publication "Family Spending".

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list *(a)* capital spending under the PFI in each year since 1997 and *(b)* planned spending for the next three years, for each Department; and if he will estimate the impact on revenue to the Government of these PFI projects for each of the next three years for each Government Department. [100848]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Treasury is currently updating the information sought as part of its normal bi-yearly reporting of information on PFI contracts. I expect this information to be published in the first half of December.

Office for National Statistics

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he intends to publish the new framework document for the Office for National Statistics. [100731]

Miss Melanie Johnson: As stated in the recent White Paper, "Building Trust in Statistics" (Cm 4412), the Government intend to publish a Framework for National Statistics as soon as possible.

House Prices

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what policy options are available to him to dampen house price increases. [100575]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The abolition of MIRAS from next April, higher rates of stamp duty for properties over £250,000, and the Government's new macro-economic framework will contribute to stability in the housing market.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* inquiries have been received by the Working Families Tax Credit Inquiry Line and *(b)* successful claims for working families tax credit have been made by residents of Pendle. [100626]

Dawn Primarolo: The response line for the Working Families Tax Credit and the Disabled Persons Tax Credit had handled 762,000 inquiries up to the 24 November. Reliable estimates for the numbers in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit in Pendle are not yet available.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the number of recipients of the working families tax credit who are benefiting from the child care tax credit. [100670]

Dawn Primarolo: It is estimated that 224,000 claims for Working Families Tax Credit were granted during October. Of these, it is provisionally estimated that about 26,000 are in receipt of the child care tax credit.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire will benefit from the working families tax credit; by how much; and if he will make a statement. [100590]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates for the numbers in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit in Shrewsbury and Atcham and in Shropshire county are not yet available. It is estimated that in 2000–01 for the UK as a whole, the first full year of the Working Families Tax Credit, about 1.4 million families will enjoy the more generous help provided by the new scheme. Families in receipt of the credit will receive on average £24 a week more than they would on Family Credit.

Bio-diesel

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to give tax incentives to those producing bio-diesel from *(a)* rape seed oil and *(b)* recycled waste edible oils; and if he will make a statement. [100243]

Mr. Timms: There are no such plans. At this time, particularly with the success of the introduction of ultra low sulphur diesel to the UK market, the case for a tax incentive for bio-diesel remains uncertain.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to reduce duty on bio-diesel produced through the recycling of waste edible oils to the same level as on other environmentally-friendly fuels; and if he will make a statement. [100242]

Mr. Timms: There are no such plans. There is little information available to support the case for a duty reduction to the same level as road fuel gas, the only other fuel that has a duty rate less than that on ultra low sulphur diesel.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans he has to encourage production of bio-diesel; and if he will make a statement; [100244]

(2) if he will maintain duty on bio-diesel at the same level as that on mineral diesel; and if he will make a statement. [100222]

Mr. Timms: There are no plans to change the current duty arrangements for bio-diesel. The environmental benefits of cleaner diesel fuel are well understood and the UK has taken a lead internationally by encouraging the production of ultra low sulphur diesel. It is not clear that encouraging the production of bio-diesel would add measurably to the benefits already enjoyed.

Third World Debt

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to forgive the export credit guarantee debt of the world's poorest countries. [100053]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The terms of the deal agreed at the G7 Summit in Cologne and subsequently ratified by the IMF/World Bank Annual Meetings provides for the forgiveness of 90 per cent. or more of the commercial debts of 41 of the world's poorest countries. Since the Annual Meetings, the Government have said that they are prepared, on a case-by-case basis, where necessary, to go beyond 90 per cent., possibly up to 100 per cent. debt forgiveness where debt relief will finance poverty reduction.

IR35

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the responses to the Inland Revenue's consultation upon IR35, listing those *(a)* for and *(b)* against the proposals. [100141]

Dawn Primarolo: Many of those who have commented on our proposals have acknowledged that there is a real problem with avoidance of tax and National Insurance Contributions using personal service companies, and that the Government is right to tackle it.

We did not issue a formal consultation document, and those who sent in responses would not have expected their views to be published, so we do not intend to do so. However, some of the representative bodies who did take part in consultation have published their own responses, for example, on the internet.

Tax Avoidance

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the Government's strategy in respect of tax avoidance. [100140]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government's strategy for tackling tax avoidance is to target legislation at a range of avoidance schemes whose exploitation is reducing tax revenues. Each of the last three Finance Acts has contained important measures to close loopholes and reduce the opportunity for tax avoidance. Further legislation will be introduced in next year's Finance Bill to counter avoidance based on capital gains tax gifts relief. The Government are committed to creating a fairer tax system. Artificial and contrived tax avoidance schemes undermine fairness, at the expense of those who do not indulge in them.

CABINET OFFICE

Equality

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the Government's approach to equality issues. [100810]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government are working to transform Britain into a society which is inclusive and prosperous. Eliminating unjustified discrimination wherever it exists and making equality of opportunity a reality for all is at the heart of the Government's agenda. Equality of opportunity is not only inherently right, it is also essential for Britain's future economic and social success. Much has been achieved in the last two years. But we are not complacent. A lot remains to be done. We will continue to act to stamp out discrimination, remove

barriers and improve the position of groups facing disadvantage and discrimination in employment, public life and public service delivery. We will ensure that the right legislative framework and institutional arrangements are in place and that information, guidance and other support is available to challenge discrimination and deliver fair treatment to allow everyone to develop and contribute to their full potential. That is to the benefit of all—individuals, communities, business—in a healthy, modern, diverse society.

We will avoid unnecessary and burdensome regulation and will promote, encourage and support progress through non-legislative means. However, we will legislate where necessary or desirable when legislative time permits. In doing so, we will be governed by the principles of improving consistency between the protection afforded to different groups by different legislation, modernising enforcement powers, and by the need for the public sector to lead by example.

As explained in our response to the Better Regulation Task Force Review of Anti-discrimination Legislation, we will where practicable harmonise the provisions of the Race Relations Act 1976, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and align the equality commissions' powers. This will significantly extend discrimination law coverage and strengthen the powers of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) to match those of the Disability Rights Commission (DRC). We will legislate to remove barriers to the equality commissions working together on common issues and to enable them to produce joint guidance.

We are modernising Government. Not only will we continue to tackle discrimination in all institutions, we will champion equality in every sense and at every level. Public bodies must take the lead in promoting equal opportunities and the Government will put this obligation in legislation as soon as Parliamentary time permits. Together with our commitment to implement the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry action plan, this will help ensure public institutions and services are free from discriminatory procedures and practices and should improve the position of disadvantaged groups, both as employees and users of public services. This will not in any way replace or supersede the existing statutory arrangements in Northern Ireland where there is already a duty on the public sector to promote equality of opportunity. We will be looking at, and learning from, the operation of the law in Northern Ireland. We will also build on existing mainstreaming and appraisal guidance to ensure that policies are inclusive, and take full account of the needs and experience of all those likely to be affected by them, and of the impact on particular groups in society.

We will continue to take action to meet our commitment to remove the under-representation of women, members of minority ethnic groups and disabled people on public bodies; and to meet the challenging targets set for representation of these groups in the Civil Service.

The Race Relations (Amendment) Bill announced in the Queen's speech, will extend the Race Relations Act to public functions not previously covered, such as law enforcement and immigration. It will implement, and go beyond, one of the Lawrence Inquiry Report recommendations by making it unlawful for public authorities generally to discriminate in the exercise of their functions. This is an important step in the Government's efforts to ensure that the public sector sets the pace in the drive towards equality; and we will extend it to the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 when legislative time permits.

The gender pay gap is indefensible. We will support further action to address this and to achieve greater choice of career, of working patterns and a better balance between work and home responsibilities that will benefit both businesses and individuals.

We intend to launch a campaign to promote employment policies which help people balance work and life delivered through partnership with employers. Fairness at Work measures are improving parental and maternity leave, and allowing time off for emergencies. The National Childcare Strategy, Working Families Tax Credit, Childcare Tax Credit and the National Minimum Wage are all bringing benefits and removing barriers for women and men. We will consult on changes to Tribunal procedures to speed up and simplify equal pay claims.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 lags behind sex and race legislation in the protection it provides for disabled people. The establishment of a Disability Rights Commission, in April 2000, will address one of the Act's major weaknesses but there are other gaps in coverage. The Disability Rights Task Force, which has been looking at securing comprehensive rights for disabled people, will report shortly. The Government will carefully consider its recommendations. But we are committed to improving the rights of disabled people. Where appropriate legislative opportunities arise, we shall use them to pursue this commitment.

Further legislation is not enough in itself. Changing negative attitudes towards disability, and indeed all forms of discrimination, is crucially important. We shall continue with our campaign to address the lack of knowledge of disability issues and raise awareness among service providers' of their duties to improve access for disabled people.

We are certain that a great deal of progress can be made through the provision of information and guidance to ensure awareness of rights and responsibilities. The Government have already produced a Code of Practice on discrimination in employment based on age and proposes, in conjunction with the EOC, preparing a Code of Practice on discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Evaluation of the effectiveness of this Code and consideration of developments in other areas will inform any future decision on the need for legislation.

The Government are alive to the concerns that have been expressed about the issue of religious discrimination, and to the case for it to be made subject to the law. However, this issue raises many difficult, sensitive and complex questions. We have commissioned research to try to assess the current scale and nature of religious discrimination, and the extent to which it overlaps with racial discrimination, in mainland Britain. The results, due in autumn 2000, will help to inform our thinking about the appropriate response.

Clarification of the law and advice will be provided in a number of areas to encourage the adoption of good practice. There will be a code of practice on discrimination against volunteers, guidance on positive action to tackle under-representation of women and ethnic minorities, and guidance on sexual harassment at work. In particular, we are looking at ways of giving small businesses better access to coherent information and advice about equality issues. We are planning to pilot a new joined-up service next year.

Overall, therefore, we intend to combat discrimination across a broad front, using both legislative and non-legislative means as appropriate, and with the public sector taking the lead. To this end, the Government will introduce legislation as soon as Parliamentary time allows, following a targeted consultation exercise in the first half of 2000; and will press ahead with the non-legislative measures outlined above. Our efforts to combat discrimination are already making an impact and will, in conjunction with new actions, continue to yield results making Britain a better place to live and work for all.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Animal Feed

Mr. Thompson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions have taken place between the Government and SEAC in relation to the use of pigmeat and bonemeal in the feed of other farm animals. [99260]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 November 1999]:* At its meeting on 3 June 1999, SEAC considered a paper prepared by the Meat and Livestock Commission on this subject but concluded that this would not be the right time to relax the ban on feeding pig MBM to other farm animals. My right hon. Friend the Minister asked SEAC to look again at this matter at its meeting on 29 November.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the result of the Veterinary Products Committee's meeting of 18 November in respect of recommended policy towards the suspension of the authorisation of Zinc Bacitracin for use in animal feed. [98550]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* Alpharma SA submitted papers which included new evidence and an assessment of the public health implications of the EU suspension of the authorisation of zinc bacitracin as an antimicrobial growth promoter. The Veterinary Products Committee agreed to consider these papers at its December meeting and, if appropriate, to offer advice to Ministers which would assist in future discussions on whether or not the EU suspension should be withdrawn or made permanent.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the advantages and disadvantages of the suspension of the use of zinc bacitracin in animal feed, including its effect on the use of therapeutic antibiotics used in human medicine in animals; and if he will make a statement. [98444]

Ms Quin: Council Regulation (EC) No 2821/98 prohibited the use of bacitracin zinc and three other antibiotic growth promoters. The reasons underlying the Regulation were set out in full in the recitals and included an explanation that bacitracin zinc is used in human medicine and that it could be used for the treatment of vancomycin resistant enterococci in humans. The prohibition has been introduced as a protective measure taken as a precaution.

The Government's support of the ban was guided by advice from the independent Veterinary Products Committee (VPC) and the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF). Reports from both Committees have been published. The advantage of the ban on bacitracin zinc is that it helps to minimise the risk of the development of resistant strains of bacteria, with the disadvantage that it may add to the costs of poultry production. Three other antibiotic growth promoters are authorised for use in poultry in the EU. Other antibiotics may be used therapeutically under veterinary supervision and their use will depend on the disease condition of a particular flock. There are no figures available on the quantities of therapeutic antibiotics used in farming since the introduction of the ban.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his assessment of the suspension of the use of zinc bacitracin in animal feed on the use of therapeutic antibiotics of importance in human medicine in animals. [98447]

Ms Quin: The suspension of the use of bacitracin as a growth promoter is unlikely to have had a significant effect on the use of antimicrobials of importance in human medicine as other antimicrobial growth promoters are available for use in poultry production.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice the Government have received from the British Veterinary Poultry Association on consequences for public health of the suspension of the use of zinc bacitracin in animal feed. [98446]

Ms Quin: The Veterinary Medicines Directorate has received a number of letters from the Chairman of the Medicines Working Group of the British Veterinary Poultry Association (BVPA) about the ban on four antibiotic growth promoters. The BVPA's Working Group supported moves to reduce reliance on these products, but sought time before the ban took effect to allow access to appropriate, properly evaluated alternative products. The Government successfully argued for a six-month delay in the imposition of a ban. Three substances—flavophospholipol, avilomycin, and salinomycin—are now authorised in the EU for use as growth promoters in poultry.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effect of the suspension of the use of zinc bacitracin on the use of amoxycillin and penicillin in poultry. [98443]

Ms Quin: Bacitracin zinc was permitted for use throughout the European Union as a growth promoter in poultry. Its use, and that of three other antibiotic growth promoters, was prohibited from 1 July this year by Council Regulation (EC) No. 2821/98. The Government supported the ban on the basis of advice from their independent scientific advisory committees. Producers

were allowed six months between the Council Regulation and the implementation of the ban to adapt their production systems. Four other antimicrobial growth promoters are still authorised for use in the EU.

Amoxycillin and penicillin are not permitted for use as growth promoters but may be used, under veterinary supervision, for the treatment of poultry disease. There are no figures available to quantify whether there has been a change in the use of these therapeutic antimicrobials since the ban.

Departmental Estate

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate the current value of (i) plant and equipment, (ii) IT equipment, (iii) IT systems, (iv) office equipment, (v) scientific and laboratory equipment, (vi) furniture and fittings, (vii) vehicles, (viii) vessels and (ix) investments and the total for his Department. [99648]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The value of assets of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food as at 31 March 1999 were:

Assets	*£000*
Plant and Equipment	0
IT Equipment and Systems	46,445
Office Equipment	3,336
Scientific and Lab Equipment	13,808
Furniture and Fittings	5,694
Vehicles	4,356
Vessels	4,907
Investments	1,080
Total	79,626

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the current estimated value of land and property in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* the UK, *(c)* overseas and *(d)* in total held by his Department in the form of (i) headquarters and regional offices, (ii) laboratories, (iii) farms, (iv) buffer depots and (v) other offices, including breakdowns for historic leasehold properties and long leasehold properties. [99663]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The Ministry owns no land outside the United Kingdom. Capital valuations as at 31 March 1999 for Ministry land and property in Scotland and the United Kingdom are shown in the table. However, valuations for the separate categories of accommodation in Scotland are not given. The Ministry owns only three properties in Scotland, all of which are surplus to requirements and awaiting disposal. The individual valuations are, therefore, commercially sensitive.

£ million

	Scotland		*United Kingdom*	
	Freehold	*Historic/long leasehold*	*Freehold*	*Historic/long leasehold*
HQ/Regional Offices	0	0	34.6	11.4
Laboratories	n/a	0	228.6	4.6
Farms	0	0	26.4	0
Buffer Depots	n/a	0	3.8	0
Other Properties	0	0	8.9	0.1
Total	1.9	0	302.3	16.1

Corporate Assets

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate the current value of land and property *(a)* in Scotland, *(b)* in the United Kingdom, *(c)* overseas and *(d)* in total within the responsibility of (i) Covent Garden Market Authority, (ii) Food from Britain, (iii) Horticultural Research International, (iv) the Meat and Livestock Commission, (v) Sea Fish Industry Authority, (vi) Royal Botanic Gardens (Kew) and (vii) the Intervention Board; and what is the value of (1) plant and equipment, (2) IT equipment and systems, (3) office equipment, (4) scientific and laboratory equipment, (5) fittings and furniture and (6) vehicles for each of these bodies and for any other non-departmental public bodies within his responsibility. [99783]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The information requested is not held centrally in the form required and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

New Variant CJD

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the published references to the scientific, medical and agricultural research which indicate that new variant CJD in humans is caused by eating meat derived from BSE-infected cows. [99925]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The association between BSE and variant CJD (vCJD) has been discussed in a number of published articles. Details of those of particular significance are as follows:

1. Will R. G., Ironside-Zeidler M., Cousens S. N., Estibeiro K., Alperovitch A., Poser S., Pocchiari M., Hofman A., Smith P. G. "A new variant of Creutzfeldt Jakob disease in the UK". Lancet 1996, 347/9006, P921–925.
2. Bruce M. E., Will R. G., Ironside J. W., McConnell I. D., Suttie A., McCardle L., Chree A., Hope J., Birkett C., Cousens S., Fraser H., Bostock C. J. "Transmissions to mice indicate that 'new variant' CJD is caused by the BSE agent". Nature 1997, 389 (6650), P498–501.
3. Collinge J., Sidle K. C. L., Meads J., Ironside J., Hill A. F. "Molecular analysis of prion strain variation and the etiology of new variant CJD". Nature, 1996, 383, P685–690.
4. Lasmezas C. I., Deslys J. P., Demaimay R., Adjou K., Lamoury F., Robain O., Ironside J., Hauw J. J., Court L., Dormont D. "Experimental transmission of bovine spongiform encephalopathy to macaques". Travaux Scientifiques Des Chercheurs Du Service De Sante Des Armees 0 (18), 1997, P123–124.
5. Will R. "New variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease". Biomedicine-Pharmacotherapy, 1999, 53, NI, Feb, P9–13.

The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC), the independent expert group that advises the Government on all aspects of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, regularly reviews relevant published articles. The committee has concluded that the results of experiments reported in these articles provide convincing evidence that the agent which causes vCJD is the same as that which causes BSE.

Industrial Fishing

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he has for the reduction of industrial fishing in the North Sea. [99746]

Mr. Morley: I expect to see shortly Commission proposals reflecting the advice given in June by the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas on the need for a closure of the sandeel fishery in the Firth of Forth.

TACs

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what total allowable catches are recommended by ICES for *(a)* pout and *(b)* sand eels; and what were the catches of these fish in each of the last two years. [99755]

Mr. Morley: ICES has not made specific recommendations on the size of the total allowable catch for pout and sandeels in 2000, but has advised that the level of stocks can sustain the continuation of current fishing mortality. ICES estimates North Sea landings in the last two years as follows.

Thousand tonnes

	Norway pout	*Sandeels*
1997	201	1,140
1998	75	993

Sea Defences (East Sussex)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to change the level of spending on sea defences in East Sussex. [99717]

Mr. Morley: I have no plans to change the level of spending on sea defences in East Sussex. This Government announced an increase of £23 million in Ministry funding for flood and coastal defence over this and the next two years as part of its Comprehensive Spending Review. Applications from operating authorities for Ministry funding will continue to be considered against established technical, economic and environmental criteria, and within a national priority scoring system.

French Meat

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure that the sale of meat produced by illegal means, with particular reference to the use of human sewage or animal sludge, is declared illegal and that such meat is unavailable for circulation throughout the European Union. [99506]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* We are advised that, on the basis of available information, there are no public health grounds for banning French or other meat with regard to human or animal sludge in animal feed. The UK fully supports the Commission actions to see that rules are commonly interpreted and properly enforced.

Meat Labelling

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what guidance his Department has issued to meat producers on the labelling of meat products for sale *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* overseas. [99721]

Ms Quin: We are currently consulting interested parties on guidance aimed at ensuring that country of origin markings on all food labels, including meat products, do not mislead consumers about the true origin of the ingredients that have been used. The guidance relates to UK food labelling requirements, which themselves derive from European rules. We would therefore expect a similar approach to that set out in the guidance to be adopted for the sale of meat products overseas.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will request that the European Commission allows the country of origin labelling required for British beef sold in Europe to contain a promotional message. [99747]

Ms Quin: Under Council Regulation 820/97, it is permissible but not obligatory for British beef sold in Europe to be labelled by country or region of origin. Operators are free to label beef with a promotional message (e.g. other indications as regards quality) if they so wish, subject to the provisions of that Regulation.

Food Safety

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to increase consumer confidence over food safety. [99631]

Ms Quin: The Government has already taken a number of measures to improve consumer confidence in food safety though greater openness and transparency, putting consumers first and giving them the information to make informed judgments. Following the passage of the Food Standards Act 1999, this work will be carried forward by the Food Standards Agency, when it begins work next Spring.

Pesticides

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many pesticides have been banned from use in the United Kingdom by his Department since May 1997. [99524]

Ms Quin: Pesticide products may have their approvals revoked for a number of reasons. Since May 1997,929 pesticide products involving 229 active substances have had their approvals completely revoked. The reason for the vast majority of these revocations was as a result of a commercial decision by the approval holder not to continue marketing the products in question.

Business Advice Service

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of his Department's Business Advice Service. [99212]

Mr. Morley: My Department currently operates a Business Advice Service for exporters in our sectors, in close liaison with British Trade International. This service is run directly by my Department through its International Relations and Export Promotion Division for agriculture and fisheries goods and services, while for processed food and drink it is entrusted to a non-Departmental Public Body, Food From Britain.

Both operations were recently subjected to separate external reviews of their efficiency and effectiveness. I am happy to say that in both cases over three-quarters of the business users surveyed expressed complete satisfaction with the service, and well over half the users surveyed confirmed that their export performance has already improved as a result.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many statutory notices have been issued under Article 18 of the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997. [99290]

Mr. Morley: 1,168 Notices were recorded between 1 October 1997 and 19 November 1999. These notices were served for infringements of the Order and to facilitate the legal transport of unfit animals for treatment or slaughter. It is not possible to split the figure between these two purposes.

Covent Garden Market

Mr. Lüff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his Department's policy towards the disposal of Covent Garden market; and what plans he has to bring forward legislation to permit this disposal. [99462]

Ms Quin: We shall bring forward legislation concerning the disposal of New Covent Garden Market when Parliamentary time permits.

Pig Farming

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what forecasts he has made for the economic prospects of the pig farming sector over the coming year. [98579]

Ms Quin: Despite being some 15 per cent. higher than at this time last year, UK market prices for pigs remain below break-even levels. Expected reductions in production in other Member States should help stabilise the market, although prices do not seem likely to improve significantly in the near future.

Beef Bans

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what negotiations he has had with *(a)* Bulgaria, *(b)* Latvia, *(c)* Lithuania, *(d)* Malta, *(e)* Romania and *(f)* Slovakia over lifting their bans on British beef; and if he will make a statement. [98738]

Ms Quin: The UK has approached the authorities in the six listed countries as part of a concerted campaign to lobby non-EU countries to lift their import bans, where they exist, or to agree the necessary export certification. This follows up, and builds upon, earlier approaches to key potential markets, which included Malta and Slovakia. Malta has said that they are currently maintaining their ban on the import of British beef. The other five countries listed have not so far formally responded to our approaches.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what negotiations he has had with *(a)* Poland, *(b)* Hungary, *(c)* the Czech Republic, *(d)* Estonia, *(e)* Slovenia and *(f)* Cyprus over lifting their bans on British beef; and if he will make a statement. [98737]

Ms Quin: The UK has approached the authorities in the six listed countries as part of a concerted campaign to lobby non-EU countries to lift their import bans, where they exist, or to agree the necessary export certification. This follows up, and builds upon, earlier approaches to key potential markets, which included Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Cyprus. Cyprus has said that it will permit the import of British beef. Estonia has said they are currently maintaining their ban on the import of British beef. The other four countries listed have not so far formally responded to our approaches.

Turkey Imports

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his estimate of the numbers of overseas produced turkeys that will be imported into the UK during the Christmas period. [98451]

Ms Quin: Forecasts of turkey imports for the Christmas period are not produced. However, imports of fresh and frozen whole turkeys into the United Kingdom totalled between 8,000 and 10,000 tonnes in the fourth quarters of the last three years. In addition, imports of turkey cuts, which are not subject to the same level of seasonality, totalled between 5,000 and 6,000 tonnes in the same quarters.

Pig Industry

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress he has made in obtaining approval from *(a)* the European Union and *(b)* the Treasury for financial assistance to the pig industry with regard to the extra costs of offal disposal resulting from the BSE problem in cattle. [99047]

Ms Quin: In discussions with the European Commission, it was clear that there would be considerable difficulties in devising a scheme to meet the cost of pig offal disposal which complied with state aid rules. Until there is a proposal which could prove acceptable to the European Commission, there is no basis for seeking additional funding.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what recent representations he has made to *(a)* the European Commission and *(b)* the Council of Ministers on the subject of the British pig industry; [100689]

(2) what recent discussions he has held with *(a)* the European Commission and *(b)* the Council of Ministers on support for the British pig industry in respect of costs of BSE. [100691]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister wrote to Commissioner Fischler on 20 October urging him to reopen the Aids to Private Storage scheme and reinstate the special refund on exports of fresh and frozen carcase meat and cuts to Russia. Officials in the Department have

also discussed with the European Commission the costs faced by British pig producers because of BSE and the possibility of introducing a pig offal disposal scheme. In addition, officials attend the monthly Pigmeat Management Committee meeting, chaired by the Commission, which looks at all aspects of the situation in the EU pigmeat market. The Council of Agriculture Ministers discussed the crisis in the pig sector at its meeting on 15 November.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with representatives of the National Pig Association; and if he will publish the outcomes of those discussions. [100688]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister met representatives of the National Pig Association on 5 October and a joint communiqué was issued following the meeting. I will be meeting the National Pig Association on 6 December, when I hope to discuss issues surrounding the current state of the UK pig industry.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what meetings his Department has held with representatives of the European Parliament concerning the pig industry. [100692]

Ms Quin: Although no such meetings have been held we have kept interested MEPs informed of the situation in the pig sector by correspondence and telephone briefings.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has held with the Council of Ministers concerning pigmeat food aid exports to Russia. [100690]

Ms Quin: The subject of exports to Russia under the food aid programme was raised in the Pigmeat Management Committee meeting on 10 November. The European Commission made clear its aim of opening tendering procedures shortly for the 42,000 tonnes of pigmeat left outstanding from the earlier exercise. Discussions in the Agriculture Council have been on the Russian food aid programme as a whole rather than on specific commodities.

Badger Culling

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on progress in the Randomised Badger Culling trial. [98736]

Ms Quin: Five of the ten triplets proposed for the trial have been announced so far. Culling operations have taken place in two triplets. Survey work has been completed in one further triplet and has been started in the others. We expect to announce one more triplet before the end of 1999, and the remainder next year.

Farm Woodland

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reasons there have been delays in payments under the farm woodland premium scheme; when he expects payments to resume; and if he will make a statement. [100695]

Mr. Morley: Claims for payments this year under the farm woodland premium scheme have been, and continue to be, processed. Up to Friday 26 November, in England, 4,038 payments have been made out of 5,061 claims received (nearly 80 per cent.). All outstanding claims are being processed as quickly as possible with the aim of clearing all acceptable claims before the end of the year.

Farm-based Tourism

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what studies he has *(a)* initiated and *(b)* received concerning the obstacles to developing farm-based tourism; what action he is taking as a result of these studies; and what funds are available to him to support such action. [100271]

Mr. Morley: No such studies have been initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The Government's Tourism Strategy, "Tomorrow's Tourism", launched earlier this year, recognises tourism's role in maintaining the viability of farm businesses. The European Council Rural Development Regulation (1257/1999), which applies from 2000, enables member states to support projects to encourage tourist and craft activities, among other things. A decision on the implementation of the Regulation will be made shortly.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 1 December 1999

NORTHERN IRELAND

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much his Department has spent on civil servants' transport in each of the last two years. [98704]

Mr. Ingram: All travel undertaken by civil servants complies with the requirements of the Civil Service Management Code (Home Civil Service) or the Northern Ireland Civil Service Staff Handbook.

Spend for the Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Departments was £15.512 million in 1997–98 and £17.029 million in 1998–99.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what motor mileage allowance rates his Department offers to *(a)* ministers and *(b)* civil servants using their own vehicles for official business; and what has been the cost of each in each of the last five years. [98705]

Mr. Ingram: When travelling on official business, Ministers may use a private car instead of an official car, and claim mileage allowance in the same circumstances and on the same terms as civil servants in the Department.

For the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Departments the information is as follows:

Motor mileage rate with effect from 6 April 1997

	Up to 4,000 miles	*Over 4,000 miles*
Cars with engine capacity:		
Up to 1,500 cc pence per mile	35	20 (19)[1]
1,501–2,000 cc pence per mile	45	25 (23)[1]
over 2,000 cc pence per mile	53	36 (32)[1]

[1] Northern Ireland Office rate

Expenditure

	£000
(a) Ministers	0
(b) Civil servants	
1994–95	[1]10,084
1995–96	[2]10,482
1996–97	10,760
1997–98	10,435
1998–99	10,909

[1] Includes a pro rata figure of £2.727 million for the Department of Agriculture based on records for 9 months, and excludes a figure for the Department of Finance and Personnel, who could provide information only at disproportionate cost.

[2] Includes an estimated figure of £829,971 for the Department of Economic Development.

RUC (Sovereign Awards)

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many RUC Officers who have held the position of *(a)* Divisional Commander of Traffic Branch, *(b)* Head of Traffic Branch and *(c)* Head of Traffic Policy Branch since 1969 (i) have and (ii) have not been given Sovereign Awards. [100272]

Mr. Ingram: Since 1969, eight officers have held the position of Divisional Commander Traffic, six have received sovereign awards. Three officers have served as Head of Traffic Policy, one has received an award. Eleven Officers have been Head of Traffic Regions, two have received an award. It should be noted that not all of the officers received their sovereign awards while holding positions in Traffic Branch.

Mr. David Adams

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what cost was incurred by Strathclyde Police when investigating the treatment of Mr. David Adams in Castlereagh. [100110]

Mr. Ingram: The cost was £52,850.08.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Judges

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor received the report of Sir Len Peach on procedures for appointing judges; and when he proposes to publish it. [100299]

Jane Kennedy: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave him on 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 63W.

Asylum and Immigration Appeals

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many asylum and immigration appeals were heard without the Home Office case being presented in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 to date; and if he will make a statement. [100489]

Jane Kennedy: These statistics are not collected.

Public Trust Office

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to require the Public Trust Office to charge patients only for work actually carried out on that patient's behalf; and if he will make a statement. [100709]

Jane Kennedy: The issue of fees and charges for the services provided by the Public Trust Office was one of a number of points considered by Ann Chant CB as part of her Quinquennial Review of the Agency. She recommended the abolition of the current system of cross-subsidy between the wealthier and less well-off clients. The Lord Chancellor wishes to explore all of the Review's recommendations in detail before deciding how best to proceed, and will be making a statement in February.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Bishops

Mr. Baker: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, pursuant to his answer of 23 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 59W, on how many occasions since 1 May 1997, the Commissioners have been informed of instances where paid commitments involved time which would otherwise have been spent on episcopal responsibilities; and on how many of these occasions a sum was deducted from the stipend. [100505]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Commissioners have not been informed of any instances where a Bishop has undertaken paid commitments involving time which would otherwise have been spent on episcopal responsibilities. Bishops are not required to inform the Commissioners of paid commitments undertaken during their own time.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Golf Courses

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many golf courses have been completed in the UK in each of the last 10 years; what proportion of those are courses offering open access to the public; what financial support was given to assist the provision of such facilities; and if he will make a statement. [99637]

Kate Hoey: Information on the number of golf courses which have been completed in the last 10 years is not held centrally.

However, since the National Lottery began in 1995, Sport England's Lottery fund has made 34 capital awards for golf totalling £8,232,056, contributing towards total project costs of £21,140,875. It is a condition of Lottery awards for sports facilities that they must have open access to the public.

Corporate Assets

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what his estimate is of the value of land and property (i) in Scotland, (ii) in England and (iii) in total within the responsibility of *(a)* the British Museum (including assets in course of construction), *(b)* the Wallace Collection and *(c)* the Horniman Public Museum and Public Park Trust; and what is the total value of other assets held by these bodies; [99830]

(2) what his estimate is of the value of land and property *(a)* in Scotland, *(b)* in England and *(c)* in total held by (i) the Imperial War Museum, (ii) the Museum of London, (iii) the Museum of Science and Industry, (iv) the National Gallery, (v) the National Maritime Museum, (vi) National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, (vii) the Science Museum, (viii) the National Portrait Gallery, (ix) the Natural History Museum, (x) the Museums and Galleries Commission, (xi) the Tate Gallery, (xii) the Victoria and Albert Museum, (xiii) the British Tourist Authority, (xiv) the English Tourist Board, (xv) the British Library, (xvi) the English Sports Council, (xvii) the UK Sports Council, (xviii) the Arts Council of England, (xix) the Crafts Council, (xx) the British Film Institute, (xxi) the National Film and Television School, (xxii) the Millennium Commission, (xxiii) the National Lotteries Charity Board, (xxiv) English Heritage, (xxv) the Royal Armouries and (xxvi) the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England; and what is the value of other assets held by these bodies. [99825]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* All 29 sponsored bodies include in the notes to their annual accounts the estimated net book value of the fixed assets they hold which is broken down into separate categories, i.e. land and buildings, fixtures and fittings, motor vehicles, etc where applicable. The annual accounts for most of these bodies are laid before Parliament and the information is available in the Libraries of the House. There are three exceptions which are (i) the Crafts Council, (ii) the British Film Institute and (iii) the National Film and Television School.

The net book value of total assets held by these bodies is as follows:

	Freehold land and buildings	*Long/short leasehold property*	*Other*	*Total*
Crafts Council (as at 31 March 1999)	0	980,398	502,016	1,482,414
British Film Institute (31 March 1999)	20,800,000	22,887,000	1,664,000	45,351,000
NFTS (as at 31 December 1998)	2,954,977	0	6,083,311	9,043,288

The only body which has assets held in Scotland is the National Lottery Charities Board to the value of £0.2 million.

All other assets are held by the bodies are in England with the exception of the following:

(i) The British Tourist Authority which holds assets with a net book value of £314,000 overseas which comprises land and buildings of £25,000 and other assets of £289,000.

(ii) Sport England (formerly the English Sports Council) which holds land and buildings to the value of £3.1 million in Wales.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Refurbishment Costs

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee if he will estimate the total cost of the new kitchens in the Parliamentary Estate during *(a)* the past two years and *(b)* the next year. [100033]

Mr. Dennis Turner: This is a matter for the Director of Parliamentary Works; I have asked him to reply to the hon. Member.

Theft

Mr. Ashton: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee how many cases of theft have been reported to the police and security services in the Commons and the Lords for each of the past five years; how many prosecutions have been made; and what proportion of these reports were from staff. [101037]

Mrs. Roe: This is a matter for the Serjeant at Arms; I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

DEFENCE

Recruitment (Fiji)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what he estimates the cost of the British Army recruitment programme in Fiji was in the last financial year. [100754]

Mr. Spellar: The cost in the current financial year of the Army selection visit to Fiji currently under way is estimated to be some £104,000.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the second round of interviews for Fijian applicants to the British Army will take place. [100755]

Mr. Spellar: There are currently no plans to repeat the Army selection visit to Fiji once the current backlog of applications is dealt with.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many interviews for Fijian applicants to the British Army have taken place in the last three weeks; and if he will make a statement. [100753]

Mr. Spellar: As at 26 November, a total of 400 Fijian nationals had been through the selection process in Fiji. Of these, 200 were successful and will be called forward to the UK over the next three months to undergo the final stages in the process before starting training. A further 78 applications have been deferred for various reasons, but the applicants have the opportunity to resolve the cause of their deferment before the end of the selection visit.

Gurkhas

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will recruit more Gurkhas into the British Army to bring the force up to operational strength. [100429]

Mr. Spellar: It is already planned that to alleviate under-manning we have extended the Gurkha Reinforcement Companies and are introducing a second Gurkha Engineer Squadron and a second Gurkha Signals Squadron. There are 3,500 Gurkhas serving with the British Army and this represents the optimum to alleviate under-manning in the short term while taking account of excess manpower when we revert to full manning.

Atomic Weapons Establishment

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress in selecting a contractor to manage and operate the Atomic Weapons Establishment from 1 April 2000. [101282]

Mr. Hoon: I am pleased to announce that following the completion of negotiations a contract will be awarded today to AWE Management Ltd. (comprising SERCo Defence Support, British Nuclear Fuels plc and Lockheed Martin Corporation). The two unsuccessful consortiums have been informed. The AWE workforce and trade unions will be told of the outcome today.

The principal features of the contract are:

The contract, commencing on 1 April 2000, is for an initial period of 10 years with an option to extend to a 25 year term with an injection of private capital. The value of the initial contract is some £2.2 billion.

The delivery of the UK's nuclear warhead programme, as outlined in the Strategic Defence Review, will not be affected by the change in contractor.

The AWE sites and all assets remain in Government ownership. Appropriate safeguards have been established to protect sensitive UK information and to maintain the UK's independence in nuclear matters.

The safety of the public, the AWE workforce and the environment remain of paramount importance. Aldermaston and Burghfield will continue as nuclear licensed sites and subject to independent regulation by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII) and the Environment Agency (EA). The MOD Compliance Officer will also retain the authority and responsibility to cancel the contract and to instruct the contractor to cease operations if there is a serious breach of the MOD's requirements.

Notice Periods (Navy)

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to alter the current notice periods for Officers, RN Ratings and RM Other Ranks applying to leave the Naval Service. [101313]

Mr. Spellar: A common notice period of 12 months will be introduced for Officers, RN Ratings and RM Other Ranks who wish to leave the Naval Service from 1 June 2000. This will represent a significant improvement to the terms of service of personnel in the Naval Service. Currently, Officers who apply to retire voluntarily must wait for up to 15 months to leave the Service. RN Ratings and RM Other Ranks are required to provide 18 month's notice.

As a consequence of this change, the minimum period of service on the trained strength by RN Ratings and RM Other Ranks, following completion of initial training, will be reduced from 4 years to $3\frac{1}{2}$ years from 1 June 2000.

Officers, RN Ratings and RM Other Ranks who submit notice applications on or before 31 May 2000 will remain subject to existing notice periods. However, personnel may apply on an individual basis for these to be adjusted so that no more than 12 months are served from 1 June 2000.

Administration of Oaths

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will set out the rules governing the conduct of officers who take, or administer to other officers, *(a)* religious, *(b)* sectarian and *(c)* other oaths while serving in HM armed forces. [100174]

Mr. Spellar: The regulations governing the conduct of officers who take, or administer oaths to other officers are as follows:

(a) Religious

Service Chaplains do not take an oath specifically for the Chaplain's Branch. No oath is taken if a Serviceman converts to a different religion while in service.

(b) Sectarian

Sectarian oaths form no part of Service life and would not be tolerated.

(c) Other

Courts Martial

Members of a court-martial shall take an oath or affirm. In addition, evidence given by witnesses before a court martial shall be given after an oath of affirmation in accordance with the following regulations:

(i) Naval Court Martial Rules—Section 60 of the Naval Discipline Act (NDA) 1957.

(ii) Section 93 of the Army Act (AA) 1955.

(iii) Section 93 of the Air Force Act (AFA) 1955.

Summary Dealing

(i) Evidence on oath or affirmation—Naval Summary Discipline Regulations 1997, Regulation 12, written under sections 43, 52E and 52 of the NDA 57.

(ii) This does not apply to officers in the Army.

(iii) Under Rule 17 of The Investigation and Summary Dealing (RAF) Regulations 1997, evidence heard before a Commanding Officer is taken on oath.

Boards of Inquiry

(i) No oath is taken by members of the RN or RM when subject to the NDA. However, an individual may be warned, and if thought to be lying, then this would constitute an offence under the NDA 57.

(ii) Under Section 135 of the AA 55, the Board of Inquiry (Army) Rules 1956, evidence before a Board of Inquiry is taken on oath.

(iii) Under Section 135 of the AFA 55 and the Board of Inquiry Rules, evidence before a Board of Inquiry is taken on oath.

Affidavits

(i) In the case of RN officers and RM officers when subject to the NDA, the Book of Regulations 11, App 3—Emergency Laws (Miscellaneous Provision) Act 1953 "An Act to empower certain persons subject to the Naval Discipline Act to take affidavits and declarations outside the UK" covers affidavits taken outside of the UK.

(ii) Under Section 204 of the AA 55, when serving overseas, officers above the rank of Major and Army Legal Services officers above Captain, may take affidavits and declarations.

(iii) Under Section 204 of the AFA 55, when serving overseas, officers above certain rank, and officers in the Legal Branch of the RAF May take affidavits and declarations.

Attestation

(i) Officers in the RN or RM when subject to the NDA do not swear an oath.

(ii) Entrants to the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) who are enlisted as officer cadets, are attested into the Army in the same way as soldiers and use the same oath. The procedures for this are included in the AA 55 (Part 1)(Regular Army) Regulations 1992.

(iii) Non-graduate officer entrants to Initial Officer Training are enlisted as officer cadets and are attested into the RAF in the same way as airmen, and use the same oath, under Section 2 of the AFA 55. Graduate officer entrants are invited to make a voluntary oath of allegiance in the same form as the oath of attestation.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Driving Tests

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce the possibility of requiring people to re-take driving tests as a way of improving driving standards. [98599]

Mr. Hill: The Government do not consider that the regular retesting of all drivers would deliver significant road safety benefits. In the case of drivers who are found guilty of driving offences, courts already have powers to require those drivers who offend to undergo a retest, which for serious offences involves an extended length test. The Road Safety Strategy will address the adequacy of these powers.

EU Environmental Directives

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of EU environmental directives in *(a)* Southampton, *(b)* Newcastle, *(c)* Hull, *(d)* Sheffield, *(e)* Manchester, *(f)* Rotherham, *(g)* Dover, *(h)* Bristol, *(i)* Bath, *(j)* Sunderland, *(k)* Birmingham and *(l)* Leicester. [98576]

Mr. Mullin: The majority of Environmental Directives are implemented on a national basis and have objectives which go beyond local authority, regional and even national boundaries. Information is not collated in such a manner as to yield a measure of impact of EU environmental Directives on specific towns and cities. The environmental benefits will however be felt in these localities in terms of improved air and water quality and other environmental improvements.

Regulatory impact assessments are carried out from the earliest stages of development of a proposal within the European Commission, through to the adoption of all Directives. This includes a review of the costs and benefits of various options for giving effect to EC legislation including those which do not involve UK legislation. This involves full public consultation where appropriate. The review continues, when necessary, during the process of transposition.

Seaham Regeneration Scheme

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in respect of the funding application for the Seaham Regeneration Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [99207]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My officials met with English Partnerships and One North East on 3 and 22 November to discuss their proposal for the regeneration of Seaham Town Centre. Discussions on the funding application are continuing.

A404(M)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce his Department's decision on the funding of noise mitigation measures along the A404(M). [99233]

Mr. Hill: The A404(M) meets the initial sift criteria for noise mitigation measures announced by the former Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), on 22 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns 50–51W. Along with a number of other qualifying sites, it is being examined in further detail to establish whether additional mitigation measures can be justified.

Although our investigations into the A404(M) are almost complete, noise mitigation will need to await the outcome of the detailed studies into the other sites that met the sift criteria to ensure that priority is given to the most deserving cases.

Ruddy Duck

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the population of ruddy duck in the United Kingdom. [99599]

Mr. Meacher: The latest Wetland Bird Survey 1997–98, estimates the United Kingdom ruddy duck population at 3,585.

Source:

June 1999—"The Wetland Bird Survey 1997–98, Wildfowl and Wader counts". Peter Cranswick, Mark Pollitt, Andy Musgrove, Becky Hughes—Published by BTO, WWT, RSPB, JNCC.

Waste Management

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the Government's strategy for waste management. [99611]

Mr. Mullin: The Government published for consultation their draft waste strategy for England and Wales, "A Way With Waste", on 30 June 1999. Similar draft strategies have been produced in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The Government intend to publish the waste strategy for England early next year as a Command Paper. Responsibility for taking this matter forward in Wales is a matter for the National Assembly. It has yet to be decided whether a separate strategy will be produced for Wales, or whether a joint strategy is preferred.

Housing Investment

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the outcome, by region, of the review of the General Needs Index for Housing Investment, indicating what percentage increase each region will receive in 2000–01; and if he will make a statement on the impact on *(a)* the constituency of Heywood and Middleton and *(b)* Rochdale Metropolitan Borough. [99861]

Mr. Mullin: The Generalised Needs Index (GNI) used in the allocation of housing capital resources to local authorities reflects the relative need for housing capital expenditure in each local authority. The index was the subject of a review this year; details of the outcome of the review, which was conducted in conjunction with the Local Authority Associations, the National Housing Federation and the Housing Corporation, are available in the Library of the House. The regional shares of the revised index to be used in the allocation of 2000–01 resources are set out in the table, alongside the 1999–2000 index shares.

Region	*2000–01 (percentage)*	*1999–2000 (percentage)*	*Difference (+/-)*
North East	6.4	6.4	—
Yorkshire and the Humber	9.9	10.1	–0.2
East Midlands	6.8	6.1	+0.7
Eastern	7.1	6.6	+0.5
London	30.0	30.5	–0.5
South East	8.8	8.4	+0.3
South West	5.6	5.8	–0.1
West Midlands	11.2	10.7	+0.6
North West	14.1	15.5	–1.4
England	100.0	100.0	—

The index shares for the two years are not directly comparable because there were separate Capital Receipts Initiative and private sector renovation grant allocations for 1999–2000 which were allocated using different indices. These allocations are being combined with the main housing allocation from 2000–01 (the "single housing capital pot") to provide local authorities with more freedom in planning the composition of their capital programme.

The resources available for allocation for 2000–01 (just over £2 billion) are around 50 per cent. up on 1999–2000. The introduction of the single housing capital pot and the changes to the GNI mean that the regional increases vary between around 40 per cent. and 65 per cent. Allocations for individual local authorities, which are based 50 per cent. on the GNI and 50 per cent. on authorities' performance on housing, will be announced in the first half of December.

Rochdale's 2000–01 GNI share (0.46 per cent. of England) has fallen by slightly more (13 per cent.) than the region as a whole (down 9 per cent.); corresponding figures for parliamentary constituencies are not available. The main reasons for the fall in Rochdale's index share, like those for the region as a whole, are the updating of the private sector stock condition indicator from 1991 to 1996 English House Conditions Survey data (which shows a significant improvement in the general condition of occupied private sector stock and a reduction in the number of households eligible for a renovation grant); the extension of this indicator to cover dwellings that are in substantial disrepair as well as those which are unfit; the continuing reduction in the numbers of overcrowded and sharing households in the region; and the inclusion in the index of a measure based on homeless households in temporary accommodation.

Railway Maintenance Staff

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what technology *(a)* exists and *(b)* is under development to warn maintenance staff on the railway network of the approach of trains; and if he will make a statement on the train approach warning system. [100059]

Mr. Hill: Existing technology to warn staff working on or about the railway includes the "PEE WEE" system (a portable system which gives a special warning tone on

the approach of a train), the Train Operated Warning System (TOWS), a permanent warning device in some locations where visibility is poor and "Minimel 90" (a portable automatic track warning system). A number of similar systems are undergoing UK approval.

Proven automatic warning systems should reduce the risk of an accident to train workers considerably below the risk from systems which rely on human observation of approaching trains.

Transport (Rural Areas)

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has assessed the level of dependence of people living in rural areas on the use of *(a)* the car and *(b)* public transport. [99900]

Mr. Hill: The National Travel Survey is used to assess the travel patterns of people living in rural areas. In 1996–98, 69 per cent. of journeys by people living in rural areas were by car, and 4 per cent. by public transport. Bus is the most widely used public transport alternative to the car, 59 per cent. of rural households lived within 13 minutes walk of a bus service with a frequency of at least once an hour.

GM Crops

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the research data he has received to date on the horizontal spread of marker genes and other transgenic DNA via pollen and dust; and what assessment he has made of this research. [100166]

Mr. Mullin: There are various reports of research into the possibility of horizontal gene transfer from genetically modified (GM) plants. These are publicly available in the scientific literature. The predominant scientific view is that, although a theoretical possibility, any horizontal transfer of transgenes from GM plants in the field would be an exceedingly rare event, and its success will depend greatly on the selective pressure acting on the outcome.

The Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) considers horizontal gene transfer in the environmental risk assessment that is conducted before any GM plants can be released. ACRE does not limit itself to considering horizontal gene transfer only from pollen and dust. ACRE concentrates on the likely consequences of such transfers, not on whether or not it could happen. If horizontal gene transfer from a particular GM plant is judged to be harmful to the environment, then the release would not be allowed.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his policy is on using his powers, following the farm-scale evaluations, to revoke consents *(a)* deliberately to release or *(b)* to market GM crops. [100002]

Mr. Mullin: If the farm-scale evaluations provide evidence that there is an adverse effect on human health or the environment as a result of the management of the herbicide tolerant GM crops, then the Government will act upon this evidence, and, if necessary, use the full extent of the powers available to protect human health and the environment, including revoking consents where appropriate.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if consent holders will be able to seek direct commercial benefit from the cultivation of GM crops in field-scale and other plantings, other than the farm-scale evaluations. [99905]

Mr. Mullin: The renewed agreement with industry on the conduct of the farm-scale evaluations announced on 5 November makes clear that none of the produce from GM crop plantings in the UK will be used in a way which is of direct commercial benefit to the consent holders during the farm-scale evaluation period. Any proposals for field-scale plantings other than those for the farm-scale evaluations must be agreed by the independent Scientific Steering Committee, in the light of their relevance to biodiversity research. Smaller than field-scale plantings, including those necessary for statutory UK and EU requirements, are not covered by the agreement.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if commercial benefits may accrue to any affiliated or associated companies of consent holders in relation to commercial growing of GM crops; [99918]

(2) if consent holders will be entitled to seek direct commercial benefit after the farm-scale evaluation period in respect of the cultivation of and the produce from GM crops during the evaluation period; [99906]

(3) if he will list the commercial benefits to which the voluntary agreement announced on 5 November on the commercial growing of GM crops does not apply; [99917]

(4) which persons will be entitled to seek commercial benefit from the growing of GM crops before 2003. [99919]

Mr. Mullin: The renewed agreement with industry announced on 5 November covers the conduct of the farm-scale evaluations for the next three years, through until the Scientific Steering Committee's review and recommendations following collection of data from the 2002 crop plantings. The agreement states that no direct commercial benefit will be sought from the plantings or obtained from use of the crops during the farm-scale evaluation period. This is to protect the integrity of the farm-scale evaluations as wholly concerned with biodiversity research. Subsequent use of produce is not covered by the agreement.

Examples of indirect commercial benefits that might accrue to the consent holders from the farm-scale evaluations could include results from the farm-scale evaluations that aided consent holders' other research work, or a change in share price if a crop was perceived to be proceeding satisfactorily through the evaluation process.

In the Government's view, the renewed agreement with industry does extend to affiliated or associated companies of consent holders. Our understanding is that the farmers growing the crops in the farm-scale evaluations are likely to be compensated by the consent holders; that would be a matter for them. If consents allow, farmers may be able to use produce on-farm as animal feed.

Council House Sale Receipts

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate how many additional council houses have been built as a result of his decision to release for use by local authorities, part of the capital receipts from previous council house sales. [100021]

Mr. Mullin: The available information relates to new build or purchase of existing dwellings by local authorities. Information provided by authorities on their plans for the use of Capital Receipts Initiative resources for 1997–98 and 1998–99 indicated that around 100 council houses would be built or purchased over the two years. Most of the resources have been used to carry out improvement and renovation work on existing local authority stock.

Elephants

Mr. Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans the Government have to *(a)* oppose any change to the status of elephants at the next Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species which would allow any further international trade in elephant ivory and hides and *(b)* to consult with EU partners with a view to adopting a common EU position along such lines; if he will inform Parliament of the result of such consultations with EU partners in advance of the conference; and if he will make a statement. [100298]

Mr. Mullin: The 1997 Conference of Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) agreed an experimental one-off transhipment of ivory to Japan from Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe. This took place in July 1999, under stringent safeguards agreed by the Conference and CITES Standing Committee. Proceeds from the sales are being directed back into elephant conservation and community programmes. There can be no further trade in ivory unless the next CITES Conference, to be held in Nairobi in April 2000, agrees a specific proposal to permit this.

A key element of the 1997 decision was the setting up of new pan-African and Asian systems to Monitor Illegal Killing of Elephants (known as MIKE), together with an Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS). The MIKE system in particular is new and has not yet progressed to the state where Parties can expect it to produce reliable data in time for the CITES Conference next April.

The UK is Chair of the CITES Standing Committee and we were closely involved in devising and implementing the safeguards under which the 1997 experiment is being carried out. We regret that several Parties have submitted proposals to the next Conference without waiting for the full effects of the experiment to be monitored by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the UNEP CITES Secretariat. The Government believe that any change to the status of elephants at the next CITES Conference would be premature at present. We have made this known to the European Commission and our European partners. A meeting of the EC CITES Committee has been brought forward to 14 January 2000 at the request of the UK and we will seek a common EU position as soon as possible after that meeting takes place. I will inform Parliament of the outcome.

Railway Carriages

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what checks are made before a railway carriage that has been involved in an accident is put back into service; [100223]

(2) what percentage of railway carriages previously involved in accidents were put back into service in each of the last five years; [100224]

(3) what percentage of railway carriages currently in service have previously been in an accident. [100225]

Mr. Hill: This information is not available as it is not reportable to the Health and Safety Executive's Railway Inspectorate.

Repairs and maintenance of rolling stock following an accident is a matter for the vehicle owner.

If, however, the vehicle or carriage is substantially altered during repairs, approval will need to be obtained from HM Railway Inspectorate under the Railways and Other Transport Systems (Approval of Works, Plant and Equipment) Regulations 1994 before the vehicle or carriage can be put back into operation.

HMRI have enforcement powers under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 which they would use if there was any reason to believe that safety had been compromised either as a result of repair work or for any other reason.

Road Traffic (Pollution)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) at what level, compared to 1990, road traffic levels would have to be kept to ensure air quality targets for 2010 are met; [100468]

(2) to what level road traffic would need to be kept to ensure that carbon dioxide emissions from road traffic were 20 per cent. lower than those in 1990 by 2010; [100467]

(3) what assessment he has made of the impact of Government transport policies on traffic levels; what were traffic levels in 1990; and what are the projected levels for 2010. [100469]

Mr. Hill: No estimate has been made of the level of traffic in 2010 which would be consistent with road traffic emissions in that year being 20 per cent. below the 1990 level. Such an estimate would depend on the assumptions made in respect of a number of other factors, including the fuel efficiency of the vehicle fleet, the mix of traffic between vehicle types, and the speeds at which traffic moved. This means that there will be a range of 2010 traffic totals which would be consistent with any given level of road traffic CO_2 emissions.

Similar arguments apply to emissions of relevance to the National Air Quality Strategy, although here such an assessment would also need to take into account both significant variations in air quality at the local level, and emissions from non-transport sources, which can be just as important in addressing air quality objectives.

Motorised vehicle traffic on English roads in 1990 is estimated to have been some 353 billion vehicle kilometres. Revised assessments of future traffic levels,

taking into account the potential impact of the Integrated Transport White Paper, are being prepared to inform the Government's first report under the Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Act 1998, which will be published shortly.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he plans to assess the impact of road traffic in relation to *(a)* the emission of gases which contribute to climate change, *(b)* air quality, *(c)* health, *(d)* traffic congestion, *(e)* land and biodiversity, *(f)* danger to other road users and *(g)* society in accordance with the requirements of the Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Act 1998. [100466]

Mr. Hill: The Government will shortly be publishing their first report under the Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Act 1998 on the issue of whether to set a national road traffic reduction target. In preparation for that report, we are assessing how our policies can reduce each of these adverse impacts of road traffic.

Water Industry

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to increase competition in the water industry. [100439]

Mr. Mullin: As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer said in his pre-Budget report on 9 November 1999, *Official Report,* columns 883–906, the Government are carrying out a comprehensive review of competition in the water industry and aim to publish a consultation document on options for reform early in the new year.

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of outsourcing activities previously performed directly by water companies on quality and service standards. [100457]

Mr. Mullin: The Director General of Water Services publishes an annual "Report on levels of service for the water industry in England and Wales", a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what allowance is made for regional variations and priorities in OFWAT's Water Companies Price Review. [100458]

Mr. Mullin: The price review is a matter for the Director General of Water Services. The Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Secretary of State for Wales issued guidance to the Director General on the environmental and quality objectives to be achieved by the water industry between 2000 and 2005. These reflected local environmental priorities, but were defined to avoid unacceptable impacts on water prices in different parts of England and Wales.

In the case of Dwr Cymru (Welsh Water) and Dee Valley Water, the Secretary of State's functions in this matter transferred to the National Assembly for Wales on 1 July 1999.

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information and communications with the water companies are used in the price review process and not reported in OFWAT's price determination document. [100454]

Mr. Mullin: This is a matter for the Director General of Water Services. His report "Final Determinations: Future water and sewerage charges 2000–05" includes a full account of the price review process.

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consideration OFWAT is required to give to *(a)* environmental, *(b)* health and safety and *(c)* local economic factors during a water company price review. [100453]

Mr. Mullin: The Secretary of State and the Secretary of State for Wales issued guidance to the Director General of Water Services on the environmental and quality objectives to be achieved by the water industry in England and Wales between 2000 and 2005. This guidance was published under the title "Raising the Quality" in September 1998, and was supported by more detailed announcements of company programmes on 1 March 1999.

In the case of Dwr Cymru (Welsh Water) and Dee Valley Water, the Secretary of State's functions transferred to the National Assembly for Wales on 1 July 1999. In respect of the remaining companies, the Secretary of State confirmed the environment and quality programme on 24 November.

The Director has a statutory duty to ensure that companies can finance the proper carrying of their functions. This includes obligations enforced by the Health and Safety Executive. The handling of the price review is a matter for the Director. I understand that he received representations on a wide range of issues, including factors such as local economic considerations.

Noise Pollution

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's policy following the case of London Borough of Southwark *v.* Mills, in relation to the problem of noise pollution. [100436]

Mr. Hill: We have noted with interest this clarification of the law in relation to domestic noise activity.

Westminster Underground

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his Department's estimate of the opening date for Westminster Underground Station on the Jubilee Line. [100262]

Mr. Hill: London Transport aim to open the Jubilee Line station at Westminster shortly before Christmas. It is, however, a very deep and highly complex station, being constructed on an extremely constricted site. LT cannot therefore guarantee the opening date at present.

Bridstow Primary School

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment has been made of the provision of school crossing signs or signals on the A49 to ensure safer access to Bridstow Primary School; and if he will make a statement. [99852]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Ginny Clarke to Mr. Paul Keetch, dated 1 December 1999:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the assessment for the provision of school crossing signs or signals on the A49 trunk road to ensure safer access to Bridstow Primary School.

There are school warning signs located on the approaches to this school to alert motorists to the presence of schoolchildren but there are no signals. The Highways Agency has not undertaken an assessment for signals in this location, but Herefordshire Council, who have responsibility for deciding on the need for a crossing patrol, has advised that the school does not meet the criteria for a patrol. In these circumstances, flashing amber signals would not be appropriate.

If a crossing patrol were to be operated at the school, the Highways Agency would, of course, give serious consideration to the provision of flashing amber signals.

If you would like to discuss the matter further, Tom Barry, the Highways Agency's Area 9 Manager, would be pleased to help. Tom is based at the Birmingham office at Broadway, Broad Street, Birmingham B15 1BL and can contacted by telephone on 0121 678 8366.

I hope this is helpful.

Waste Edible Oils

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many tonnes per annum of waste edible oils are produced in the UK from the UK's food manufacturing base and catering establishments; and if he will make a statement. [100221]

Mr. Mullin: The exact amount of waste of this type is not known. However, the Feed Fat Association estimate that some 90,000 tonnes of waste edible oils are recycled each year from UK food establishments.

Road Tolls

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by how much he estimates a road toll of *(a)* £1, *(b)* £5 and *(c)* £10 per private car would reduce road traffic; and what is the basis of his estimate. [99924]

Mr. Prescott *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The Government are providing powers for local authorities to put forward road user charging schemes if they think these are appropriate to deal with traffic management locally. The Secretary of State will not approve any congestion charging scheme unless: public transport has been improved first to offer motorists choice, before charging sets starts; local people have been consulted; it is clear that all proceeds will be put into improving local transport; and the appropriate technology will be in place to make it work.

The impact of road user charges on road traffic will vary accordingly to a number of factors including location, prevailing road and traffic conditions and the complimentary traffic and wider transport measures introduced alongside charges.

Water Directives

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what time scale he has set for achieving the guide values in the Bathing Water, Shellfish Waters, Surface Water Abstraction and Freshwater Fish Directives; [100340]

(2) if the guide value contained in the Bathing Water Directive, the Shellfish Waters Directive, the Surface Water Abstraction Directive and the Freshwater Fish Directive are mandatory standards; and what directions he has given to the Environment Agency on enforcing them; [100401]

(3) what plans he has to enforce the guide values contained in the Bathing Water, Shellfish Waters, Surface Water Abstraction and Freshwater Fish Directives; and if he will make a statement. [100342]

Mr. Mullin: The EC Directives on Bathing Waters, Shellfish Waters, Surface Water Abstraction and Freshwater Fish set guide values which are not mandatory values and which member states must endeavour to observe, in the case of the first two instruments, or respect, in the case of the remaining two. The obligations of each Directive, including on guide values, have been incorporated in the transposing legislation which places duties on the Environment Agency. The Government expect to see progress towards the guide values which have been set.

Shellfish

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what standards of faecal coliforms in shellfish flesh or intervalvular liquid he has directed the Environment Agency to observe; and whether these standards are expressed in terms of shellfish flesh or shellfish liquid. [100339]

Mr. Mullin: The Environment Agency is under a duty to endeavour to observe a guideline value of 300/100ml in shellfish flesh and intervalvular liquid as set out in the Surface Waters (Shellfish) Directions 1997.

Road Safety

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he proposes to introduce to improve road safety and reduce road fatalities. [100656]

Mr. Hill: We will shortly be publishing a new road safety strategy which will include casualty reduction targets for the year 2010. The strategy will set out a range of measures for reducing road casualties and improving road safety.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to issue guidance on future funding criteria for Regional Development Agencies; and if he will make a statement. [100519]

Ms Beverley Hughes: There are no plans to issue any such guidance. The funding arrangement is for the Public Expenditure Settlement, which covers a three-year period, to determine the overall provision for each RDA, taking

account of their corporate plan. In making yearly allocations under the Settlement, the Government take account of any criteria relating to a particular programme and the RDAs current corporate plan, including matters such as the agency's effectiveness in carrying out its responsibilities.

Rents

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what evidence he has received to date, in respect of the forthcoming review of housing benefit, of the impact of fluctuations in standard reference rents on the ability of tenants to take up and retain tenancies. [100770]

Mr. Mullin: We have received representations from a number of organisations. My Department has, jointly with the Department of Social Security, commissioned and published research on housing benefit and the private rented sector, and is undertaking research on a range of related issues, including the work of rent officers.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the Government's policy on determining regional boundaries for the local delivery of services funded by central Government departments; and if he will make a statement. [100627]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government's policy is set out in the White Paper *"Modernising government"*. There is a presumption that Departments and other public bodies should adopt the boundaries used by the Government Offices in the Regions unless there are strong overriding considerations for not doing so. Progress will be reviewed in 2002.

Rail Safety

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam will receive a letter from the Chair of the Health and Safety Commission concerning signals passed at danger. [100447]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* I understand that a letter was sent to the hon. Member on 29 November.

London Social Services

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each London borough how many *(a)* people were registered homeless, *(b)* people were on local authority waiting lists, *(c)* local authority housing visits were completed, and *(d)* registered social visits were completed (i) in the financial year 1998–99 and (ii) in the present financial year. [100803]

Mr. Mullin: The latest available information is given in the table. Information on visits carried out by local authorities is not collected centrally.

	Homeless households accepted and in priority need		*Number of households on the housing register at 1 April 1999*
	1998–99	*1999[1]–2000*	
Barking and Dagenham	257	39	1,785
Barnet	1,048	147	5,004
Bexley	319	54	2,762
Brent	920	[2]n/a	11,703
Bromley	728	[2]n/a	3,202
Camden	1,555	[2]n/a	6,302
City of London	53	14	720
Croydon	882	186	6,389
Ealing	1,016	[2]n/a	7,261
Enfield	754	217	4,263
Greenwich	1,436	334	5,454
Hackney	705	[2]n/a	13,480
Hammersmith and Fulham	709	175	4,451
Haringey	975	337	7,409
Harrow	725	160	2,374
Havering	386	105	1,511
Hillingdon	1,083	190	7,655
Hounslow	1,056	[2]n/a	5,188
Islington	1,176	[2]n/a	12,428
Kensington and Chelsea	611	149	7,671
Kingston upon Thames	400	[2]n/a	2,846
Lambeth	1,039	302	13,050
Lewisham	1,085	[2]n/a	11,520
Merton	205	53	3,345
Newham	910	[2]n/a	11,000
Redbridge	302	[2]n/a	2,956
Richmond upon Thames	633	140	4,667
Southwark	1,204	372	4,645
Sutton	299	46	1,963
Tower Hamlets	1,070	304	6,215
Waltham Forest	1,048	[2]n/a	7,172
Wandsworth	613	201	2,916
Westminster	1,266	267	7,028

[1] April to June
[2] n/a denotes that the authority has not yet reported
Source:
Housing Investment Programme Returns 1999, Quarterly P1E (Homeless Activity) returns 1999 Q1

Local authorities have different practices for compiling and managing housing register/waiting lists which mean that simple comparisons between authorities can be misleading.

House Selling

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to require energy audits and advice to be included in the information provided by house vendors *(a)* in the pilot schemes of his house selling proposals and *(b)* subsequently. [100801]

Mr. Mullin: A key proposal in our package of reforms to the home buying and selling process is a requirement for the seller or the seller's agent to put together a pack of standard documents and information for prospective buyers, before the property is put on the market. The pack should include a house condition report which contains an assessment of how energy efficient the property is. The pack, including a house condition report and energy efficiency assessment, will be tested in the Bristol Pilot scheme starting later this month.

Common Land (Vehicle Access)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he

has to amend the law relating to common land, with respect to vehicle access; and if he will make a statement. [100708]

Mr. Mullin: In addition to our proposals to give a statutory right of access on foot to registered common land, the Government are considering whether there should be any further changes to the legislation that affects common land. If so, there will be public consultation on what changes would be desirable.

London Underground

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made on the proposals for integrating London Underground's sub-surface lines with the national railway network; and if he will make a statement. [101288]

Mr. Prescott: I announced in June that Railtrack and London Transport would be investigating the scope for taking forward two specific integration schemes, running East-West and North-South, and, on that basis, Railtrack would bid for the PPP contract to maintain and upgrade the Underground lines in question.

Railtrack and London Transport have not found it possible to identify a practicable scheme to integrate the Tube and the national railway network on an East-West axis on the basis and timetable envisaged in June. All the options would have involved a connection through Paddington. This has highlighted a number of issues relating to constraints on capacity in the Paddington approaches, not least in the light of the Ladbroke Grove tragedy.

Accordingly, the Government, Railtrack and London Transport have together agreed that there is no longer sufficient basis for an exclusive PPP negotiation between London Transport and Railtrack on the sub-surface lines and links with the national railway.

Competitions for the two deep-tube PPPs are well underway and London Transport will now commence a competition for the sub-surface PPP structure so as to leave open the option of integration from the west of London at some point in the future.

The work so far has confirmed the validity of an integration scheme on a North-South axis, based on extending the London Underground East London Line to North London from Whitechapel, and to south and south-west London from Canada Water and New Cross. I have asked Sir Alastair Morton and the shadow Strategic Rail Authority to advise me as soon as possible on the best way of implementing North-South integration taking into account the parallels with Thameslink, and the need to obtain the necessary approvals.

I have also asked Sir Alastair Morton and the shadow Strategic Rail Authority to undertake a wide-ranging study of the capacity issues and potential for integration to the west of London. The shadow Strategic Rail Authority will be working closely with Railtrack and LT in undertaking these studies.

Railtrack and Government will of course continue to work together on a range of initiatives based on our plans for a growing railway, which will mean Railtrack delivering a large programme of infrastructure projects to improve the capacity and quality of the network, not least in major works such as the Channel Tunnel Rail Link.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Minority Ethnic Groups

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will arrange for regular surveys of the police and other public services to monitor progress towards equal satisfaction with those services among black and other minority ethnic groups. [100027]

Mr. Charles Clarke: So far as the police service is concerned, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary set a Ministerial Priority in June to increase trust and confidence in policing among minority ethnic communities in line with Recommendation 1 of the Macpherson report. Recommendation 2 of that report proposed a range of performance indicators for assessing achievement of the Priority, which included achieving equal satisfaction levels across all ethnic groups in public satisfaction surveys. The Steering Group which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary chairs to oversee the implementation of the Action Plan published in March as the Government's response to the Macpherson report, approved at its October meeting proposals for the development of indicators in line with Recommendation 2 including satisfaction surveys. Further work is currently being undertaken on the development of this indicator.

For other public services, the Home Office is committed to the establishment of government-wide and departmental performance indicators to measure improvements in race equality. Work is currently being undertaken on the development of these indicators which are likely to include measures of confidence in public services. The performance indicators will be announced in Spring 2000.

Cremation

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many bodies have been cremated in the United Kingdom in each of the past five years; and, in each year, what percentage cremations constituted of the number of deaths. [99915]

Mr. Boateng: The table sets out statistics from the Office for National Statistics and the Federation of British Cremation Authorities.

Year	*Number of cremations*	*Number of deaths*	*Percentage of cremations*
1994	434,223	627,636	69.2
1995	445,574	645,493	69
1996	445,934	636,007	70.1
1997	446,305	629,746	70.9
1998	439,145	629,112	69.8

Defendant Statistics

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) for each year since 1990, in what percentage of either-way cases that went to trial

before a jury the defendant was found guilty; and what the percentage conviction rate was in such cases for *(a)* white defendants and *(b)* black and ethnic minority defendants; [100249]

(2) in each year since 1990, what was the average length of sentence imposed on defendants found guilty in either-way cases that went to trial before a jury; and what was the average length sentence imposed in such cases on *(a)* white defendants and *(b)* black and ethnic minority defendants; [100251]

(3) what was the conviction rate for *(a)* white defendants and *(b)* black and ethnic minority defendants appearing before magistrates' courts for each year since 1990. [100250]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office collected data on disposals at magistrates' courts by ethnicity of defendant in 1998 in 11 police force areas. These are pilot studies and work is required to address data quality problems. However, information from four of the areas (Lancashire, Leicestershire, Northumbria and West Yorkshire (Bradford and Keighley)) will be published in "Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System" on 9 December 1999. The information will cover prosecutions and sentencing for indictable offences. It shows that for cases disposed of (other than by committal) at magistrates' courts, the conviction rate is 67 per cent. for white defendants and 57 per cent. for black defendants.

Copies of the publication will be sent to the Library.

No national information from the Crown Court is available by ethnic group although pilots are under way. Crown Court information from the Home Office Court proceedings Database is given in the table.

Defendants pleading not guilty [1] to triable either way offences at the Crown Court, England and Wales, 1995–98

Year	Percentage found guilty	Percentage of those found guilty given a custodial sentence	Average custodial sentence length (months)
1995[2]	43	57	24.7
1996	44	61	25.0
1997	41	62	27.6
1998	38	62	28.3

[1] Pleaded not guilty to principal offence; some of those found not guilty may not have been tried by a jury (eg the judge may have ordered or directed an acquittal).
[2] Plea data only available from July 1995

Life Sentences

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of *(a)* men and *(b)* women serving a life prison sentence in prisons in England and Wales on 1 November. [100444]

Mr. Boateng: The latest available provisional information is for 31 October 1999. On that date, there were 4,175 male and 149 female life sentence prisoners in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales.

Operation Care

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in relation to Operation Care how many complaints have been received from how many complainants. [100232]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information on the number of claimants is not readily available. The number of complaints received reflects each separate complaint rather than the number of individuals who claim to have been abused. As of 8 July 1999, the number of separate complaints received was 759.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what meetings his Department has held with members of the legal profession involved in Operation Care. [100235]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that there have been no meetings between Home Office officials and members of the legal profession involved in Operation Care.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many defence witnesses have been arrested as part of Operation Care. [100233]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is no requirement in law for the defence to provide either the Crown Prosecution Service or the police with lists of defence witnesses at any stage of an investigation. I cannot say therefore whether any individual arrested as part of Operation Care might also be a defence witness.

Local Authority Care Homes (Abuse)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance his Department issues to police authorities relating to the conduct of investigations of cases of sexual abuse in local authority care homes. [100237]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In August, the Government issued draft new inter-agency guidance "Working Together to Safeguard Children" which takes account of new research, experience and legislation concerning child abuse. It includes a section on children living away from home and provides guidance on investigating allegations of abuse committed by professionals, carers or volunteers. A final version of the document will be issued in the new year.

Child Pornography

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action the Government are taking to prevent child pornography being transmitted over the Internet; and what penalties exist to deter those responsible for publishing child pornography over the Internet. [100293]

Mr. Boateng: The criminal law applies equally to material on computer systems as to material in other forms. We have very strict legislation against child pornography which makes it an offence to produce, circulate or possess with a view to distribution any indecent photograph of a child under 16. These offences carry a maximum sentence of three years' imprisonment, an unlimited fine or both. The simple possession of an indecent photograph of a child is also an offence and carries a maximum sentence of six months' imprisonment.

Section 84 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 updated these controls to include indecent computer-generated photographs of children and they have been successfully applied to child pornography transmitted over the Internet.

We are determined to ensure that there are effective measures against child pornography. We support the work of the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) which passes to the police details of potentially unlawful material brought to their attention by members of the public via a specially established hotline. If the originators of the material are abroad, the Foundation passes the report to the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) who liaise with the enforcement agencies of the countries concerned. The IWF took action on 430 reports of alleged child pornography in 1998.

The Government also fully support international initiatives in the Council of Europe and the G8 to combat criminal misuse of the Internet.

Police Manpower

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total change in England and Wales in the number of *(a)* all police officers, *(b)* police constables, *(c)* civilian police force staff and *(d)* special constables between May 1997 and the last date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [99793]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Information is available in respect of numbers at March 1997 and March 1999. The information is set out in the table.

Police service numbers for March 1997 and March 1999

Police Service Numbers	*March 1997*	*March 1999*	*Total Change*
Total Police Officers[1]	127,158	126,096	−1,062
Police Constables[1]	98,132	97,520	−612
Civilian police force staff[1]	53,011	53,031	+20
Special Constables	19,864	16,484	−3,390

[1] Full-time equivalent numbers

The powers of the Home Secretary to set police establishment levels for each force were removed under the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994. It is for the chief officer to determine staffing requirements within the overall resources available.

The drop in the number of special constables has resulted mainly from police forces applying higher standards when recruiting them. The use of higher standards for recruiting reflects the fact that special constables are now being deployed on duties very similar to those of regular officers.

Asylum

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the aim of clearing all current cases by October 2000, stated by the permanent secretary in his letter of 13 October to the Public Accounts Committee, refers to all current asylum cases or to all asylum cases involving children. [100483]

Mrs. Roche: The aim mentioned in the letter of 13 October referred to all asylum cases. This aim is a milestone to delivery of the published targets in April 2001. It will be kept under review in the light of pressures created by the current high level of asylum applications.

Computer-based Crime

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to develop a national fraud squad to tackle computer-based crime. [100404]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There are proposals for the establishment of a Computer Crime Unit within the National Criminal Intelligence Service, but this would not constitute a national fraud squad.

Integrated Casework Directorate

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the benchmark against which he plans to measure the four key performance indicators for the Integrated Casework Directorate listed by the permanent secretary in his letter of 13 October to the Clerk of the Public Accounts Committee. [100484]

Mrs. Roche: The benchmark figures for each of the four key performance indicators were compiled from statistics showing the output of the Asylum Directorate, the After Entry and Appeals Directorate and the European Directorate over a 13 week period between September and November 1998, divided by 13 to obtain an average weekly figure. The figures are as follows:

Category	*Number of decisions*
Asylum casework	650
Asylum appeals	250
European casework	250
General/settlement casework	4,100
Total	5,250

Deportees

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have been deported over the past 12 months; and on what grounds. [100614]

Mrs. Roche: The total number of people who have been removed or departed voluntarily from the United Kingdom between October 1998 and September 1999 is shown in the table. Regrettably, information about the grounds of removal could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Total number of persons[1] removed or departed voluntarily under port or enforcement procedures, October 1998 to September 1999

	Number
Port removals[2]	30,710
Illegal entry removals[3]	5,320
Deportation removals[3]	1,220

[1] Does not include persons who may leave the United Kingdom without informing the Immigration and Nationality Directorate.
[2] Refused leave to enter and removed.
[3] Figures are provisional and include persons departing voluntarily after enforcement action had been initiated against them.
Note:
All figures are rounded to 10.

30-year Rule

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the extent to which the 30 year rule is proposed to be relaxed in the Freedom of Information Bill; and *(a)* what kind of records will be released which would otherwise have been held for 30 years and *(b)* on what grounds records will continue to be held for the 30 year period. [100659]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Freedom of Information legislation will not affect the 30 year rule, as the principles governing the release of records at 30 years will remain broadly the same.

However, under the proposals in the Freedom of Information Bill, many more records will be released earlier, and therefore, fewer records will fall to be released at 30 years.

It is not possible to specify particular records which will be released under Freedom of Information, as earlier releases will be spread across a range of records which would otherwise have been held until 30 years.

The Freedom of Information Bill contains certain exemptions which provide the grounds for withholding information beyond 30 years. These grounds are: information supplied by, or relating to, work of the security services; national Security; defence; international relations; the economy; information from confidential sources in the course of investigations and proceedings; law enforcement (until 100 years); honours (until 75 years); health and safety; personal information (for the lifetime of the individual concerned); information provided in confidence; and specific statutory bars on disclosure.

However, even where an exemption in the Bill applies, the Public Record Office, or the authority holding the information, must consider on a case by case basis any discretion it may have to disclose the information, deciding whether the public interest in disclosure outweighs that of maintaining the exemption.

Police (Conflict Resolution)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the conflict resolution manual, revised by ACPO's Self-defence and Restraint Committee, will contain information on dealing with a mental illness; if the revision has been completed; how beat officers will receive this information; and if the manual will be made available to members of the public. [100718]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Self-Defence, Arrest and Restraint sub-committee that work is continuing on revision of the manual, and that the inclusion of information on dealing with persons with a mental illness will be considered as this work progresses.

The contents of the manual will be disseminated to officers through Personal Safety training . A decision on whether the manual can be made public will be made by the Association of Chief Police Officers once the drafting work is complete.

Shotgun Licences

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people living in England and Wales hold a shotgun licence. [100766]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The number of shot gun certificates on issue at the end of 1998 was 627,600.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters to him, dated 28 July, 10 September and 14 October, from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, concerning Bulbur Begum. [100638]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to my right hon. Friend on 26 November.

Hashman and Harrup

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what policy changes the Government plans to implement following the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Hashman and Harrup. [100588]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government intend to review the powers to bind over once all the relevant cases before the European Court of Human Rights have been decided. The case of Steel and others established that the powers to bind over to keep the peace are sufficiently well established to comply with the Convention. Following the decision in Hashman and Harrup, we shall study the Court's judgment carefully and consider how best to advise the courts and the police on the use of the power to bind over to be of good behaviour.

CS Spray

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action his Department plans to take following the September publication of the reports by the Committee on Toxicity, Mutagenicity and Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment concerning the effects of CS spray. [100782]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Following the report by the independent Committees on Toxicity, Mutagenicity and Carcinogenicity, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary indicated that there was no reason to consider withdrawing CS spray from police use.

Operational guidelines issued by the Association of Chief Police Officers have been revised to take account of the report's findings concerning the use of CS with persons who are mentally ill and those who may have respiratory conditions. The guidelines include appropriate advice on aftercare and will be issued to chief officers shortly.

The Home Office will be taking forward with the Department of Health the report's recommendation for follow up studies into persons who have received medical treatment following the use of CS spray. In addition, the Home Office's Police Scientific Development Branch is continuing work looking at alternative solvents and potential alternative incapacitants.

Probation Service

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department by what name he intends the reformed Probation Service for England and Wales to be known. [101283]

Mr. Boateng: A Bill, to be introduced to this House, will reform and modernise the Probation Service within England and Wales. The modernised service will be known as The Community Punishment and Rehabilitation Service for England and Wales (CPRS). This Service has a key role to play in delivering the Government's aims on effective sentencing and punishment that:

The public is protected from dangerous offenders;

Offenders are properly punished and their sentences are rigorously enforced;

Punishments are made to work better both in prison and outside; and

Courts have available to them a flexible range of sentences.

The Probation Service has not been well served in recent years by its name, with offenders and the general public alike unsure of its role. The new name encapsulates the Service's role as a law enforcement agency and sends out a clear message to offenders that punishment in the community is not a soft option but one that should work to reduce re-offending.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department with regard to projects at the Kennedy Institute of Rheumatology, London, involving the artificial induction of arthritis in mice, what steps were taken to assess the validity of the proposed research and identify other potential sources of the information required before the licence was granted. [100707]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, project licences are issued only if the likely benefits (to man, animals or the environment) outweigh the costs to the animals involved and if there are no alternatives which replace animal use, reduce the number of animals needed or refine the experimental design to minimise suffering. The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate advises on whether, and on what terms, licences and certificates should be granted or amended.

Xenotransplantation

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many transgenic pigs have been released since 1 January under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 for export from the UK for use in *(a)* medical research and *(b)* breeding programmes; and to which countries they have been exported. [100702]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: 49 pigs were exported in March and a further 40 in July. Both batches were exported to the United States of America for use in breeding programmes.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many project licences have been issued during the current year for primates to be used in xenotransplantation procedures, broken down by *(a)* type of procedure, *(b)* severity banding of procedure, *(c)* number of primates used per procedure and *(d)* origin of primates used. [100701]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: One licence has been issued this year for kidney transplants from transgenic pigs to primates. The severity banding is moderate. 14 macaques were used in 14 procedures and all were obtained from the Philippines.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many procedures have taken place under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 whereby baboons have been given humanised pig hearts; how many baboons were involved; and how many days each survived. [100703]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Since the commencement of baboon studies in 1966, a total of 44 baboons have received transgenic pig hearts, with the longest survival time reaching 99 days. In addition, five animals received non-transgenic hearts.

Political Party Funding

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans the Government have to regulate political party funding, donations and sponsorship for *(a)* events, *(b)* conferences and *(c)* elections. [100428]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Proposals for legislation on these matters, in response to the Fifth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life on the funding of political parties, were published on 27 July 1999 and a Bill will be introduced into Parliament later this session.

Strip Searches

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the reasons are for the delay in the publication of his Department's recommendations following its review of strip search procedures; and if he will make a statement. [100173]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service has not yet submitted its recommendations to me. The report is being finalised. Its completion has been delayed because of competing pressures and the complexity of the Prison Service regulations concerned. I understand that I will receive the report and the recommendations shortly. As agreed by the then Minister of State for the Home Department, my right hon. Friend, the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin) in her reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) on 15 July 1997, *Official Report*, column 98W, a copy will be placed in the Library when it is completed.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Lackenby to Shipton Pylon Line

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate his Department has made of the final total cost to public funds of improving the approach roads to the National Grid Company's Lackenby to Shipton transmission line. [100725]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to her by my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), the Under-Secretary on 8 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 391W.

World Trade Organisation

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to ensure legitimate concerns about health, environmental and animal welfare issues can be effectively accommodated with the rules of the World Trade Organisation. [100698]

Mr. Caborn: Existing WTO rules allow Governments wide scope to impose trade restrictions as a means of addressing concerns about health and many environmental issues. However, the Government, along with its EU partners, believe there is room for some improvements in the rules, particularly better to accommodate environmental and animal welfare concerns, and are pressing for these subjects to be included in the forthcoming negotiations.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who is the business representative on the Government's delegation to the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle. [100697]

Mr. Caborn: The business representative is the Chairman of the CBI's Trade Policy Working Group.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what (i) discussions he has had with and (ii) communications have been received from industry and business associations in respect of the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle. [100700]

Mr. Caborn: Ministers and officials have had many discussions with and communications from industry and business associations in respect of the meeting in Seattle. Broadly, industry is very supportive of the launch of a new comprehensive round of trade negotiations, recognising the importance to the UK economy of open markets and removing barriers to trade.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what position the Government will be adopting at the World Trade Organisation ministerial meetings in Seattle in respect of the previously agreed end to the multi-fibre arrangement. [100699]

Mr. Caborn: In the Government's view, the terms of the phase-out of the multi-fibre arrangement set out in the GATT Uruguay round agreement on textiles and clothing (ATC) should not be reopened and all signatories should implement the agreement in full.

Export Finance

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the outcome of the Government's discussions with the banks concerning their future remuneration under ECGD's fixed rate export finance scheme. [101287]

Mr. Byers: These discussions are now concluded. The previous arrangements expired on 30 November.

A new scale of remuneration, which seeks an equitable balance between the interests of the banks, the taxpayer and the exporter, has been introduced with effect from 1 December.

A copy of the memorandum which sets out the details of the new arrangements has been placed in the Library of the House for information.

ECGD

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what financial support has been provided for the ECGD in each of the last five years from public funds. [100513]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD receives funds from three votes—administration, public expenditure and trading. The actual outturn as reported in the appropriation accounts for the last five years is outlined in the table.

£000

Year	Administration Vote	Public Expenditure Vote	Trading Vote	Total
1994–95	28,002	(25,080)	(17,295)	(14,373)
1995–96	24,582	15,789	(264,105)	(223,734)
1996–97	22,824	17,771	(122,197)	(81,602)
1997–98	22,627	40,077	(53,152)	9,552
1998–99	22,885	[1]318,959	(110,135)	231,709

[1] The increase in the Public Expenditure Vote in 1998–99 is in respect of a loan from Treasury to enable the refinancing of outstanding export finance which will bring future financial benefits to the Exchequer.

Notes:

1. Figures in brackets indicate a net contribution to the exchequer
2. Figures for 1998–99 have been certified by the NAO but not laid before Parliament

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what role the ECGD plays in the securing of *(a)* military aircraft export orders and *(b)* overseas sales of commercial aircraft. [100512]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD's guarantees to exporters and banks help UK exporters to secure contracts including in the aerospace field.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those categories of commercial transactions which do not qualify for ECGD support. [100516]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD provides guarantees for finance products of two years or more. These finance products are applicable to exports of a capital or semi-capital nature plus related services. ECGD does not normally provide support for exports that only justify less than two year credit terms.

ECGD also provides insurance-based products:

1. to exporters who have cash or near cash contracts of a capital or project nature plus related services;
2. as the provider of reinsurance to the commercial insurance market when required; and
3. through its Overseas Investment Insurance scheme.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which OECD countries have export insurance schemes providing the same categories of cover as are presently available via the ECGD. [100507]

Mr. Caborn: The majority of OECD countries have export credit insurance schemes which are broadly similar to that provided by the ECGD, although not all have privatised their short-term credit insurance operations. In respect of medium and long-term business (involving credit terms of two years or more) there is a common system to classify the sovereign and country credit risk of buyer/borrower countries under an agreement concluded through the OECD—the Arrangement on Guidelines for Officially Supported Export Credits.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Civil Servants

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many civil servants were employed by his Department in *(a)* 1999, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1997. [99052]

Mr. Wills: The number of civil servants employed by the Department for Education and Employment in 1999, 1998 and 1997 were as follows:

	1 April 1997	*1 April 1998*	*1 April 1999*
Department for Education and Employment	[1]4,679	4,061	4,251
Government Office	[1]n/a	673	624
Employment Service	31,550	30,796	32,675
Total	36,229	35,530	37,550

[1] At 1 April 1997, the Government Office staff were included in the figures for DfEE.

Note:

The figures are based on full-time equivalents and include casual staff.

The increase in staff shown by the Employment Service is a direct result of using more personal advisers and New Deal activities.

Departmental running costs for the periods in question are as follows:

Department for Education and Employment including Government Office

	£ million
1996–97	264.8
1997–98	237.2
1998–99	255.9

These are the net running cost figures from the Treasury's Public Expenditure Survey database, as at September 1999.The apparent "dip" in running costs in 1997–98 is caused by the use of end year flexibilities in both 1996–97 and 1998–99 to meet staff restructuring costs within the Employment Service and DfEE.

Employment Service

	£ million
1996–97	929.2
1997–98	[1]853.7
1998–99	[1]911.1

[1] Includes impact of the "Windfall Tax". This is the one-off receipt raised on the excess profits of the privatised utilities. The tax is being used to fund the Welfare to Work programme. The Welfare to Work programme incorporates all the "New Deal" activities and is designed to extend new work opportunities to people detached from the labour market.

British Teachers (European Union Schools)

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to ensure that British teachers working in the European Schools are eligible for the promotion on pay scales to which they are entitled under the European Schools Statute. [100065]

Mr. Wicks: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) on 21 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 538–39W.

Target Setting

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many targets have been agreed between his Department and (i) local authorities and (ii) other bodies apart from his own agencies and non-departmental bodies since May 1997. [99472]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* My Department has set out a number of Key Performance targets in its PSA and Strategic Framework to 2002, including the National Learning Targets for England for 2002. The Key Performance targets underpinned by targets set with local authorities and other bodies, excluding our own agencies and non-departmental bodies, since May 1997, are listed:

DfEE target: a reduction by one third in school truancies (from 0.7 per cent. to 0.5 per cent. half days missed a year through unauthorised absence), and exclusions (from 12,500 to 8,400 permanent exclusions a year) by 2002.

Local authorities have been required to set targets for reducing unauthorised absence and for reducing permanent exclusions for the three years commencing 1999–2000. These targets have been included in their Education Development Plans. Provisions under the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 also allow the Secretary of State to require governing bodies of maintained schools to set school-level targets for reducing unauthorised absence where their attendance is significantly below average. During 1999, 304 schools have been asked to set targets.

DfEE target: an increase in the proportion of those aged 11 meeting the standard of literacy for that age (level 4 in the KS2 test) from 63 per cent. to 80 per cent. by 2002, and an increase in the proportion of those aged 11 meeting the standard of numeracy for that age (level 4 in the KS2 test) from 62 per cent. to 75 per cent. by 2002.

Targets at local education authority level for the achievement of 11-year-olds in literacy and numeracy, as measured by the Key Stage 2 national curriculum tests in English and maths, have been agreed with the Department for 2000 and 2002. Local education authorities are also required to submit to the Department targets for their authority for 2001 by January 2000, as part of the process of revising their Education Development Plans.

DfEE targets: an increase in the proportion of those aged 16 who achieve one or more GCSEs at grade G or equivalent, from 92 per cent. to 95 per cent. by 2002, and an increase in the proportion of those aged 16 who achieve five or more GCSEs grades A-C from 45 per cent. to 50 per cent. by 2002.*

Each local authority has agreed with the Department three targets for achievement by pupils aged 16: the percentage gaining 5 or more GCSEs at A8-C; the percentage gaining at least 1 GCSE at A*-G (or equivalent); and the average points score per pupil. These targets are listed in the authority's Education Development Plan.

DfEE target: 45 per cent. of medium sized or large organisations and 10,000 small organisations are recognised as Investors in People by 2002.

The Department sets targets for Training Enterprise Councils each year which reflect their local contribution to the national target.

The Department's Key Performance targets are also supported at operational level by numerous other targets to ensure delivery by individual units. Listing all of the Operational Targets the Department has agreed with local authorities and other bodies would be inappropriate and disproportionate in terms of resource. However, the DfEE annual Departmental Report and Annual Report of the Employment Service does include performance related information.

Youth Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the Youth Council held in Brussels on 23 November; and if he will make a statement. [99846]

Mr. Wills: The European Commission presented its future approach to youth affairs on which there was an exchange of views. The Commission also summarised progress on its proposal for Recommendations concerning the application of Community law in the field of mobility of students, trainees, young volunteers, teachers and instructors.

The Presidency gave a progress report on the proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Community action programme for youth. Following discussion, the Presidency concluded that conciliation would take place during the Portuguese Presidency. All the European Parliament's second reading amendments, including the budget for the programme, would be carefully considered.

The Council agreed the text of its Resolution on the non-formal education dimension of sporting activities in the European Community Youth programmes. The Resolution is a mixed Resolution of the Council and Ministers of the member states meeting in the Council[1], and will be adopted at a future Council of Ministers. The Commission's view that this should only be a Council Resolution would be noted.

The draft conclusions on the implementation of measures to combat child sex tourism were presented by the Presidency which also summarised youth activities which it had organised during its Presidency.

[1] The Resolution acknowledges that sport is one of way of working with young people. However, whilst the Community has competence for co-ordination in the field of youth, sports policy remains the competence of member states. The mixed Resolution therefore reflects this difference in competence.

Departmental Estate

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his estimate is of land and property *(a)* in Scotland, *(b)* in the United Kingdom, *(c)* overseas and *(d)* in total for (i) his core Department and (ii) the Employment Service; and what is the total value of other assets held by each of these bodies. [99841]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* For the core Department, we are unable to provide value information because it is being developed as part of the implementation of resource accounting. The information is currently being audited. The first set of resource accounts will be published in respect of 1999–2000.

Value information for the Employment Service (ES) is set out as follows. These values have been derived from accounting information used to produce the audited 1998–99 ES published accounts.

As at 31 March 1999:	£
Total value of Land and Property in ES	
(a) In Scotland	16,056,242
(b) In the United Kingdom	125,118,000
(c) Overseas	0
Total	141,174,242
Total value of all other assets held by ES	
(a) In Scotland	1,714,746
(b) In the United Kingdom	77,070,000
(c) Overseas	0
Total	78,784,746

SSAs

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will give the median and the semi-interquartile range for *(a)* SSA per primary pupil and *(b)* SSA per secondary pupil, adjusted for inflation, for all local education authorities in England and Wales for the 10 years from 1990–91 to 1999–2000. [100341]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Median and interquartile ranges for real terms SSAs: 1990–91 to 1999–200

£

	Median	*Semi-interquartile range*
1990–91		
Primary	1,977.7	149.3
Secondary	2,810.5	216.1
1991–92		
Primary	2,131.8	159.5
Secondary	3,088.1	233.1
1992–93		
Primary	2,178.0	173.6
Secondary	3,179.1	256.5
1993–94		
Primary	2,187.2	174.3
Secondary	3,170.9	256.7
1994–95		
Primary	2,223.1	176.0
Secondary	3,111.9	247.7
1995–96		
Primary	2,158.0	172.5
Secondary	2,899.3	227.1
1996–97		
Primary	2,178.1	138.5
Secondary	2,921.8	188.4
1997–98		
Primary	2,194.8	114.2
Secondary	2,873.9	161.5

Median and interquartile ranges for real terms SSAs: 1990–91 to 1999–200

£

	Median	Semi-interquartile range
1998–99		
Primary	2,257.1	101.6
Secondary	2,936.2	134.6
1999–2000		
Primary	2,333.7	106.8
Secondary	2,985.9	141.6

Sexually Abused Victims

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance his Department issues to local education authorities regarding compensation payments to victims of sexual abuse. [100239]

Ms Estelle Morris: My Department does not issue guidance to local authorities on compensation payments to victims of sexual abuse. That is a matter for the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority and the Courts.

Undergraduates

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many students enrolled in their first year at universities in England for the academic years *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 1998–99; [100247]

(2) how many students continued with their second year of study at English universities for the academic years *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1999–2000. [100246]

Mr. Wicks: The available information is shown in the following table.

Full-time first degree students in higher education institutions in England

Academic year	Students in their first year of study	Students in their second year of study
1996–97	259,647	—
1997–98	—	213,833
1998–99	261,433	—
1999–2000[1]	—	n/a

[1] Data for 1999–2000 will not be available until April 2000.

These figures cannot be used to calculate non-completion rates directly. Some students switch from full-time to part-time study, while others suspend studies for a year but return to qualify later. In addition the available figures will include those who are repeating the first year of their course and those who fail their first year examinations.

The latest information on non-completion rates published by the Department relates to students beginning full-time and sandwich first degree courses in 1995–96, and shows that between 18–19 per cent. of these students failed to complete their course, a low figure compared to other countries. ("Non-completion" covers students who leave their course for various reasons, over the duration of their course.)Information on student progression for individual higher education institutions in the UK will be published on 3 December, in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's "Higher Education Performance Indicators". These calculations take into account the wider variety of patterns of attendance of students, including factors such as changing courses or institutions and repeating or intermitting years of study.

Class Sizes

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many classes of 30 and over for five to seven year olds were recorded for schools in Shropshire in *(a)* May 1997 and *(b)* the latest available date; and if he will make a statement. [100592]

Ms Estelle Morris: Figures relating to the size of Key Stage 1 classes are collected in January, and (from 1998) also in September. In January 1997, there were 109 Key Stage 1 classes in Shropshire LEA taught by one teacher with 31 or more pupils. In April 1998, following local government reorganisation, Shropshire LEA split into two: Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin LEAs. In January 1999, there was a combined total of 51 such classes in Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin. The corresponding figure for September 1999 was 10.

Architecture Students

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will issue guidance to local authorities on advising architecture students to apply for funding for their entire course at the start of the course. [100629]

Mr. Wicks: Local education authorities recognise the distinctive two-part structure of the architecture course and the need to encourage eligible students to apply at the outset for support for all years of the course. Where students do not apply immediately, they can make a later application for support for Part II of the architecture course. LEAs have discretion to continue their eligibility for support for the whole of the course at any time before they complete Part 1. Nevertheless, we shall consider the case for additional guidance for the next academic year.

Teaching Vacancies (Bolton)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teaching vacancies there are in *(a)* maintained schools and *(b)* colleges of further education in the Bolton Local Authority area; and into which categories of subject the vacancies fall. [100606]

Ms Estelle Morris: There were two vacancies for full-time teachers in the maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special school sector in the Bolton local authority area in January 1999. Both posts were for classroom teachers in secondary schools, one in physics and the other in modern foreign languages.

Information on the number of teaching vacancies in colleges of further education in the Bolton local authority area is not held centrally.

Commonwealth Students

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many Commonwealth students are studying in the United Kingdom; and which countries have received financial help from his Department in relation to them. [100767]

Mr. Wicks: The number of Commonwealth students studying in the UK in the 1997–98 academic year, the latest for which figures are available, were:

	Higher education	*Further education*
Full-time	44,900	2,100
Part-time	11,100	2,100
Total	56,000	4,200

This Department offers scholarships through the Montserrat Emergency Award Scheme, established in 1998–99, to students from Montserrat wishing to study in higher education in the UK who left Montserrat as a direct result of the volcanic activity.

There are also two schemes open solely to applicants from the Commonwealth; the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, funded jointly by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DfID) and the Shared Scholarship Scheme, funded by the DfID. Commonwealth students may also apply for Government funded scholarships which are open to all international students, including the British Chevening Scholarships Scheme, funded by the FCO and the Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme, funded by this Department.

Adult Education

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what arrangements he will put in place to ensure that local authorities' adult education services are funded by the local authorities in 2001 at or above the level of the relevant standard spending assessment sub-category; [100602]

(2) how much each local education authority in England spent on adult education in the financial year 1998–99; [100612]

(3) what is the level of adult education funding that will be transferred from the budgets of each English local education authority to the Learning and Skills Council in the financial year 2001–02. [100613]

Mr. Wicks: In "Learning to Succeed" we set out our intention to give the proposed Learning and Skills Council (LSC) responsibility for adult and community learning from April 2001. We made clear that provided local authorities meet the requirements to prepare and implement effective lifelong learning development plans they can expect to receive from the LSC a substantial part of its resource for adult and community learning.

Following consideration of the comments received on our proposals we will be announcing shortly more detail of our plans for establishing the LSC, including arrangements for funding adult and community education through that body rather than local authorities.

Information on local education authority expenditure, including that on adult education, will be available in the new year.

EU Education Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the Education Council held in Brussels on 26 November; and if he will make a statement. [100829]

Mr. Wills: The Council of EC Education Ministers, at which I represented the UK, adopted a resolution on

"developing new working methods for European co-operation in the fields of education and vocational training".

Ministers then held an open debate on the role of education and vocational training in the new millennium.

The Council received information from the Presidency on the outcome of conciliation with the European Parliament on the proposal for a second phase of the Socrates education action programme. Information was received from the European Commission on: the proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and the Council to establish the European Year of Languages 2001; forthcoming proposals for European Parliament and Council Recommendations on the mobility of students, young trainees, young volunteers, teachers and trainers and on European co-operation in the evaluation of the quality of school education; the role of education and training in implementing the Stability Pact for South-East Europe; the implementation of the Council resolution of 6 May 1996 on educational multimedia in the fields of education and training; and indicators and benchmarks in the field of school quality.

Ministers received a report from the European Schools High Council on the future of the European Schools and held an exchange of views. The Council also received information from the Portuguese delegation on plans for the Portuguese Presidency of the Council.

A copy of the Council minutes will be placed in the Library in due course.

Dance and Drama Awards

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the dance and drama awards for students on further education courses. [101314]

Mr. Wicks: Over 830 of the most talented students have been successful at auditions and are now benefiting from the awards while they train at some of the country's leading dance and drama schools. The latest information suggests that the awards have already succeeded in attracting unprecedented numbers of students from families with among the lowest levels of family income. Over 20 per cent. of students are from families with incomes of less than £10,000 per annum.

The awards provide substantial help with tuition fees and a contribution towards living costs. However, we have recently announced that from next September the level of award paid to students on further education courses and living away from home will increase from a maximum of £2,025 to £4,025. Within these amounts the provision for students' living costs rises from £1,000 to £3,000 per annum (£2,550 outside London). The sums will be targeted in order to provide increased resources to students in greatest need. We have also raised the

assessment threshold so that all students with residual family incomes below £17,369 will get the appropriate maximum funding available.

Pending the introduction of the new rates next year, additional funding of up to £2,000 per student will be paid to students. This will be over and above their current funding for fees and living costs and will be allocated relative to their assessed needs. We plan to make the first additional payments in December.

School Transport Review

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to announce the results of the review of school transport. [100328]

Jacqui Smith: The School Travel Advisory Group is looking into all aspects of school transport. We expect the Group to publish its report early in the new year.

University Salaries

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review the salary scales for university staff; and if he will make a statement. [100710]

Mr. Wicks: The pay and conditions of staff in higher education are a matter for the employers not the Government. The Bett Report into higher education pay and conditions, published in June, made a number of recommendations for restructuring the sector's terms and conditions. It will be for the higher education employers to consider how these recommendations can be implemented.

Barnet Schools

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in each of the last five years, what have been the total number of pupils attending state primary and secondary schools in the Borough of Barnet; what proportion of them have been out-of-borough; and what were the numbers of full-time equivalent teachers. [100218]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information available is shown in the following table.

Pupils and teachers in Barnet LEA—January each year

	Maintained primary schools		*Maintained secondary schools*	
	Headcount of pupils	*Full-time equivalent number of teachers*	*Headcount of pupils*	*Full-time equivalent number of teachers*
1999	26,441	1,179.3	20,437	1,339.8
1998	26,177	1,172.7	20,106	1,322.7
1997	25,981	1,167.3	19,783	1,336.0
1996	24,809	1,136.4	19,437	1,312.2
1995	24,443	1,107.0	19,158	1,290.0

Hendon-Barnet College Merge

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will announce his decision on the proposed merger of Hendon and Barnet Colleges. [100852]

Mr. Wicks: No proposal has been received at this stage by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Independent-State School Partnership Scheme

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* applications and *(b)* successful applications from each region have been made in respect of the Independent/State School Partnership Grant Scheme (1999–2000). [100331]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Applications for independent/state school partnerships grant in 1999–2000

Region	*Total number of applications*[1]	*Number of successful applications*	*Percentage of successful applications*[2]
North East	12	2	17
North West and Merseyside	36	6	17
Yorkshire and Humber	17	5	29
East Midlands	13	3	23
West Midlands	41	7	17
East of England	31	9	29
London	31	9	29
South East	44	8	18
South West	39	7	18
England	264	56	21

[1] Applications were for one or two year grants, commencing in 1999–2000.
[2] Successful applications as a percentage of total applications in the region.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to extend the Independent/State School Partnership Scheme beyond 2001. [100330]

Ms Estelle Morris: Independent evaluation of the first year of the scheme was recently carried out by Leeds University School of Education. Their report reinforces our belief that partnerships are contributing to raising standards and increasing educational opportunities for the pupils and staff involved. We therefore intend to encourage independent and maintained schools to work in partnership beyond 2001.

WALES

Consultants

9. **Mr. Rowe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much money the Welsh Office spent on consultants in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99; and how much is planned to be spent by the Office of the Secretary of State for Wales during this current financial year. [98885]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The following figures detail Welsh Office expenditure on consultants in the relevant financial years, running from 1 April to the following 31 March.

	£
1996–97	739,363
1997–98	1,311,459
1998–99	1,836,194

I do not expect to incur any expenditure on consultants in the current financial year.

NHS Finance

10. **Mr. Denzil Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he next plans to meet the First Secretary of the National Assembly to discuss the financing of the NHS in Wales. [98886]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I are in constant dialogue with the First Secretary and Assembly Secretaries about all important issues affecting Wales, including the funding of the NHS.

Beef on the Bone

11. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Agriculture Secretary about the ban on the sale of beef on the bone. [98888]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I am in regular contact with my colleagues in the National Assembly and we discuss a range of issues including all matters relating to agriculture in Wales.

16. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had about the lifting of the beef-on-the-bone ban in Wales. [98893]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have discussed this issue with a number of individuals and organisations.

17. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has held with the First Minister of the National Assembly concerning the ban on beef on the bone. [98894]

Mr. Hanson: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply my right hon. Friend gave earlier today to the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan).

21. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his discussions with MAFF on the beef-on-the-bone ban. [98898]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I am in regular contact with my colleagues in the National Assembly for Wales and Whitehall and we discuss a range of topics including matters relating to agriculture in Wales.

Civil Service Numbers

12. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many civil servants his Department employs currently; and if he will make a statement on trends relating to civil service numbers *(a)* since May 1997 and *(b)* projected over the next three years. [98889]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department currently employs 35 civil servants, with a further five vacancies. Questions relating to overall civil service numbers should be directed to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office.

Children

14. **Mrs. Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the child care and child protection elements of the Government's legislative programme and its impact on Wales. [98891]

Mr. Hanson: The Secretary of State will meet the First Secretary and appropriate officials to discuss these issues as necessary. I have already met the Assembly Secretary Jane Hutt to discuss proposed legislation, including childcare and child protection elements.

Match Funding

15. **Mr. Öpik:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about including additional money in the block grant for Wales for objective 1 and 2 match funding. [98892]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I see the Chancellor of the Exchequer regularly when we discuss a number of issues.

24. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many representations he has received about objective 1 and 2 funding since the beginning of May. [98901]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My predecessor and I have received many representations about Objectives 1 and 2, some of which have referred to funding.

25. **Mrs. Gillan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary with regard to objective 1 match funding. [98903]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I hold regular meetings with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales. We have discussed a range of issues, including Structural Funds support in Wales, and I am aware of the importance of the issue.

Special Advisers

18. **Dr. Michael Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much money is currently spent by his Department on special advisers; and how much was spent during *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99. [98895]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department is currently spending around £90,000 per annum on special advisers. The previous costs were:

	£
1996/97	30,964
1997/98	95,430
1998/99	101,786

Electoral System

19. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the operation of the electoral system used in elections to the Welsh Assembly. [98896]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The electoral system used in elections to the Welsh Assembly is provided for in Section 4 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 and combines the "first past the post" method for constituency Members with "proportional representation" for additional Members. This ensures that the National Assembly is representative of all parts and interests in Wales.

National Minimum Wage

20. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the impact of the national minimum wage on Wales. [98897]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I met the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry last month and we discussed a range of issues. The Government fully recognise the importance of assessing the effect of the introduction of the national minimum wage and they asked the Low Pay Commission to monitor and evaluate the minimum wage's introduction and impact across the UK, with particular reference to the effect on pay and employment. The Commission is due to report later this month.

Children (Leaving Care) Bill

23. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has scheduled with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales about the Children (Leaving Care) Bill outlined in the Queen's Speech. [98900]

Mr. Hanson: I will be having discussions with the First Secretary and appropriate officials as and when necessary.

Transport

26. **Mr. Donald Anderson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the Government's legislative programme and its impact on transport in Wales. [98904]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary regularly and we discuss a number of issues, including the impact on Wales of the Bills in the Government's legislative programme.

Forestry

27. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales about the protection of forestry in Wales. [98905]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet weekly with the First Secretary of the National Assembly and we discuss a wide range of topics. However, Forestry matters in Wales are a matter for the Forestry Commission which reports direct to the Assembly.

Block Grant

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the size of the block grant. [98890]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the Assembly First Secretary on a weekly basis to discuss a range of issues.

Cabinet Committee on Agriculture

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which minister in his Department is a member of the Cabinet Committee on Agriculture. [100102]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* There is no Cabinet Committee exclusively concerned with agriculture matters. I assume the hon. Member refers to the Rural Affairs Committee (misc 8). This Committee was established to consider rural matters in England. However, I receive the Committee's papers and if these raise issues which are relevant to Wales I will attend the Committee's meetings.

Farmers

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last received a delegation of farmers from Wales. [98883]

Mr. Paul Murphy: During October I received deputations from the Farmers Union of Wales, the National Farmers Union and the Country Landowners Association. On each occasion the meetings were productive and covered a wide range of topics. I am attending the CLA Wales dinner on 1 December.

Education

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss assistance for education in Wales. [98902]

Mr. Hanson: The Secretary of State regularly meets the First Secretary to discuss various issues.

I have met Tom Middlehurst to discuss aspects of education, and will continue to meet or talk to Mr. Middlehurst on a regular basis.

Pre-Budget Statement

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the impact on Wales of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's pre-Budget statement. [98887]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the Assembly First Secretary on a weekly basis to discuss a range of issues.

PRIME MINISTER

Iraq

Q11. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Prime Minister what recent representations Her Majesty's Government have received from *(a)* UN organisations and *(b)* church organisations about continuing UN sanctions and military action against Iraq. [98916]

The Prime Minister: We continue to maintain close contacts with all the UN organisations operating in Iraq. There are also regular meetings between officials and representatives of church organisations at which the sanctions regime and our enforcement of the No Fly Zones can be discussed.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 1 December. [100329]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further meetings later today.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Pig Industry

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the extra costs per pig imposed on pig breeders which arise from animal welfare arrangements in Britain which are not imposed in other EU countries; and if he will provide compensation for these costs. [99292]

Ms Quin: No recent estimates have been made but at the time the decision was taken to improve pig animal welfare standards in the UK, it was decided that the costs should not be compensated by the taxpayer. My right hon. Friend the Minister and I do, however, continue to urge purchasers of pigmeat to source to UK welfare and other standards.

Sterling

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what money is currently available for compensating UK farmers for the problems caused to them by the strength of sterling. [99213]

Ms Quin: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply to my hon. Friend for Kettering (Mr. Sawford) on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 740W.

Fish Quotas

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what response he has made to the suggestion by the European Commission representative in the UK that national fishing quotas could be abolished after 2002. [99752]

Mr. Morley: None. No member state or the Commission has put forward any such proposals.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what changes are proposed in the fish quota system from 2003, with particular reference to the replacement permit system; and if he will make a statement. [100448]

Mr. Morley: No changes have been proposed in the TACs and quotas system under the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) nor do I expect any change as a result of the review of the CFP in 2002. The question of replacement permits does not therefore arise.

Transgenic DNA

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what analysis has been made of the propensity of bacteria in the human mouth and respiratory tracts to take up antibiotic resistance marker genes and other transgenic DNA. [100168]

Ms Quin: This issue is carefully considered by the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes as part of their rigorous safety assessment of genetically modified (GM) foods. The Committee has published two reports on the use of antibiotic resistance markers in GM plants for human food (in July 1994 and July 1996), copies of which have been placed in the Library of the House. In addition the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Foods funds a programme of R&D to underpin the safety assessment process which provides information on this and other issues related to GM foods.

TREASURY

Energy Saving

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many representations he has received *(a)* in favour of and *(b)* in opposition to a reduction in the rate of VAT on energy saving materials in the last year. [100775]

Mr. Timms: Treasury and HM Customs and Excise have received a number of representations in favour of a reduced rate of VAT for energy savings materials. They have received none opposing it.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what rates of VAT are charged in each of the other European Union countries on *(a)* energy saving materials and *(b)* domestic fuel. [100776]

Mr. Timms: The VAT rates given in the table apply to fuel put to both domestic and business use in other Member states. Only the UK has a different VAT rate for fuel put to domestic use.

Percentage

Member state	*(a) Energy saving materials*	*(b) Fuel and power*
Austria	20	[1]10, 20
Belgium	21	[2]12, 21
Denmark	25	25
Finland	22	22
France	20.6	20.6
Germany	16	16
Greece	18	[3]8, 18
Ireland	21	12.5
Italy	20	10
Luxembourg	15	[4]6, 12
Netherlands	17.5	17.5
Portugal	17	[4,5]5, 17
Spain	16	16
Sweden	25	25
UK	[6]5, 17.5	[7]5, 17.5

[1] The reduced rate applies to supplies of wood.
[2] The reduced rate applies to supplies of coal and peat.
[3] The reduced rate applies to supplies of wood.
[4] The 6 per cent. rate applies to gas and electricity; wood, oil and coal are 12 per cent.
[5] 5 per cent. applies to electricity and oil.
[6] For energy saving materials installed under a Government funded grant scheme.
[7] 5 per cent. applies to supplies of fuel and power for domestic and charitable use.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action he has taken in the last year to pursue with other European Union countries a wider reduction in the rate of VAT charged on energy saving materials. [100773]

Mr. Timms: There have been no discussions within the last year.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the employment implications of reducing the rate of VAT on energy saving materials. [100774]

Mr. Timms: None.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which European Union countries which have varied the rate of VAT charged on energy saving materials since May 1997, indicating the change to the rate charged; and what representations he has made to *(a)* the European Commission and *(b)* other bodies on these changes. [100771]

Mr. Timms: No other EU Governments have varied the rate of VAT charged on energy saving materials since May 1997.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has made to the European Commission regarding the reduction of VAT on energy saving materials in France. [100772]

Mr. Timms: None. The French reduced rate is for the renovation and repair of private dwellings, under a European Commission initiative permitting experimental reduced VAT rates. It does not cover DIY energy saving materials, since the experimental reduced rate may only be applied to services.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the reduction of VAT on energy saving materials in *(a)* France and *(b)* Italy; and what plans he has for similar reductions in the United Kingdom. [100601]

Mr. Timms: There have been no reductions in VAT on energy saving materials in France or Italy. France has announced a reduced rate for the repair and renovation of private dwellings under the optional experimental scheme covered by Annex K of the EU's Sixth VAT Directive. Italy has made an application to the Commission to do the same.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will reduce VAT on energy saving materials to 5 per cent. [100603]

Mr. Timms: This Government have already reduced to 5 per cent. the VAT rate applicable to grant-funded installation of energy saving materials in the homes of the less well off. EC VAT law does not allow the UK to apply a reduced VAT rate to sales of energy saving materials for DIY installation.

Small Firms

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost to the Inland Revenue of providing the support for small firms' payroll operations outlined in the Inland Revenue press release of 11 November. [100740]

Dawn Primarolo: The support announced on 11 November builds on existing extensive assistance for small firms and is estimated to cost up to £40 million over the next three years.

EU Contributions

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the net and gross contributions by the United Kingdom to the EU in 1997 and 1998, indicating the source of the date. [100621]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested can be found in Table 3 of the Government's White Paper "European Community Finances" (Cm 4382).

Registrars' Services

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what consultations he has had with representatives of the Muslim and Jewish communities about the provision of registrars' services between Christmas and the end of the Millennium holiday; [100584]

(2) what steps he has taken to ensure adequate provision of registrars' services during the period between Christmas and the end of the Millennium holiday. [100585]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The provision of special facilities such as for members of the Muslim and Jewish communities is a matter for the Proper Officer for Registration Matters in each local authority in agreement with the registrars.

The Registrar General's standing instructions will apply as they do every Christmas and New Year period. If the Registrar's Office is shut for two or more consecutive days, or if special facilities such as those for the Jewish and Muslim communities are provided in the area, there will be a notice explaining what arrangements have been made to deal with urgent matters. Proper Officers have been asked to publicise the availability of the service over the Christmas and New Year period. The Registrar General has advised the Proper Officer for Registration Matters in each local authority that an emergency service will be needed for death informants on 30 December 1999 and 4 January 2000.

Tax Havens

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of income lost to the Treasury as a result of the use of off-shore tax havens. [100851]

Dawn Primarolo: This information is not available.

Personal Service Companies

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many personal service companies currently pay tax and national insurance; what was the yield of tax and national insurance from those companies; and what methodology was employed to calculate the current estimated shortfall of tax and national insurance receipts from personal service companies, in the current financial year. [100511]

Dawn Primarolo: The available information is contained in the Regulatory Impact Assessment on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill published in October 1999. Estimates of the yield from the proposed measure to stop avoidance of tax and National Insurance Contributions using personal service companies were included in the Financial Statement and Budget Report published on Budget Day in March 1999.

Tax Changes

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the quantifiable effect of tax changes made since May 1997 on *(a)* the UK economy, *(b)* business activity and *(c)* Treasury receipts and payments. [100515]

Dawn Primarolo: The revenue effects of the last three Budgets were published in table 2.2 of the July 1997 Financial Statement and Budget Report, and table 1.3 of the March 1998 and March 1999 Financial Statement and Budget Reports. Developments and prospects in the economy are shown in Chapter 3 of the July 1997 Financial Statement and Budget Report, and Annex A of the March 1998 and March 1999 Financial Statement and Budget Reports.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which changes to the tax system since May 1997 *(a)* have required primary legislation, *(b)* have been achieved by secondary legislation and *(c)* have been required as a result of European or other international agreements. [100514]

Dawn Primarolo: The answer is as follows:

(a) Tax changes requiring primary legislation since May 1997 were included in the 1997, 1998 and 1999 Finance Bills. In addition, changes to various taxes were included in the following Acts: Regional Development Agencies Act 1998, CDC Act 1999, Tax Credits Act 1999, Access to Justice Act 1999, Social Security Contributions (Transfer of Functions) Act 1999, Welfare Reform Act 1999, Employment Relations Act 1999 (NMW) and Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997.

(b) A full list of tax changes made by secondary legislation is available in the House of Commons Library.

(c) Changes to the tax system which have been required as a result of European or other international agreements are as follows:

888/98/EC FISCALIS—Decision of the European Parliament and the Council establishing (and funding) a programme of Community action to improve indirect taxation systems of the internal market.

98/80/EC Amending directive 77/388/EEC—A special scheme for investment in gold.

99/49/EC Amending directive 77/388/EEC—Provides for continuation of the minimum standard rate of VAT throughout the EC.

99/59/EC Amending directive 77/388/EEC—in respect of VAT arrangements for telecommunication services.

Financial Services and Markets Bill

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the instructions to Parliamentary Counsel to date for the drafting of the Financial Services and Markets Bill. [101133]

Miss Melanie Johnson: No. Drafting instructions represent only the beginning of the drafting process. The Government have published explanatory notes on the Bill, and Ministers explain the Government's policy in the course of Parliamentary proceedings.

Tax Credit

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many businesses in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire will benefit from the new research and development tax credit; and if he will make a statement. [101127]

Dawn Primarolo: The information is not available.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the status is of the recent letter from the Benefits Agency to weekly recipients of Child Benefit encouraging them to opt for payment by automated credit transfers; and if he will write to all those who opted for automated credit transfer as a result of this letter to remind them of their continued option of payment through a post office. [99565]

Mr. Rooker: Letters have been issued to some Child Benefit customers who are currently receiving their benefit on a weekly basis where it appears that they, in fact, should have been paid four weekly. We are obliged to pay people at the frequencies set out in relevant legislation and we must put this right when errors are discovered. Child Benefit is a four weekly benefit except in certain circumstances. It is not normally a weekly benefit.

The letter explained that their Child Benefit would, when their current order book expired, be paid on a four weekly basis unless the customer contended that this would cause particular hardship.

As with all Departmental literature which refers to methods of payment, the letter explains to customers that they can receive benefits directly into their bank account by automated credit transfer (ACT). The wording in the letter has been in use since 1994 and is consistent with the words used in claim packs for benefit and advice pages contained in benefit order books.

The exercise that resulted in letters being issued to some Child Benefit customers has been completed. There are no plans to issue any further letters to these customers.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are *(a)* the annual costs of the production and distribution of order books and *(b)* his estimate of the annual running costs if printed order books are replaced by benefit payment cards. [99567]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

The total annual cost of the production and distribution of order books and girocheques is £45,068,487. Order books will not be replaced by benefit payment cards pursuant to the answer from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 24 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 21W.

Post Office

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will list the principal activities of his Department and its agencies which provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices and *(b)* other post offices; if he will assess whether the level of business generated in each

case is likely to increase or decrease over the next five years; and which new areas of business for post offices are likely to be developed by his Department and its agencies over the same period; [99555]

(2) what the policy of the Benefits Agency is on encouraging the replacement of benefit payments to post offices by automated credit transfers prior to 2003. [99564]

Mr. Rooker: Our principal activity, which provides business for Post Office Counters Ltd. (POCL), is the encashment of pensions and allowances (together with supporting administration and accounting functions). This activity is fully available in both Crown and other post offices.

Current trends indicate a decline in this activity between now and 2003. This is due to the reduction in the number of people generally depending on benefit and the steady growth in customer preference for payment direct to bank accounts. From 2003 ACT will become the normal way of paying benefits and, as a result, the rate of decline in current order book and girocheque activity on behalf of the Department will accelerate.

It is envisaged that the migration of benefit recipients from paper based methods of payment to more efficient and secure payment direct to bank accounts will take place over a two year period from 2003 to 2005. Between now and 2003 the Department will work with POCL to ensure that a wide range of banking services are available over post office counters.

Officials from the Department have already met with representatives from the Post Office to discuss the mutual development of strategies which will ensure that benefit recipients continue to have access to cash at post office counters.

Currently order book and girocheque pay 65 per cent. of all benefit customers.

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what has been spent by his Department on external consultants and advisers since May 1997 funded from (i) his Department's programme provision and (ii) his Department's running costs. [99492]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* The Department's programme provision funds benefit payments only.

Information in respect of the Department's expenditure on consultants is in the table.

Departmental expenditure on consultants

£ million

Financial year	Expenditure on management consultants	Expenditure on IT consultants	Total expenditure
April 1997 to March 1998	11.6	8.3	19.9
April 1998 to March 1999	13.0	14.2	27.2
April 1999 to October 1999	13.1	5.6	18.7

Notes:

1. Figures rounded to nearest 100,000.
2. The expenditure has been incurred on a number of major IT and change initiatives.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many and what proportion of claimants expressed as a percentage of all claimants had their disability living allowance withdrawn in *(a)* the Vale of Glamorgan, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* the UK in (i) June, July and August 1998 and (ii) June, July and August 1999. [100164]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Mr. Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Norman Haighton to Mr. John Smith, dated 30 November 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked Peter Mathison to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question. As he is unavailable I am replying on his behalf. You asked how many and what proportion of claimants, expressed as a percentage of all claimants, had their Disability Living Allowance withdrawn in (a) the Vale of Glamorgan, (b) Wales and (c) the UK in (i) June, July and August 1998 and (ii) June, July and August 1999.

I should explain that we do not keep data specific to the Vale of Glamorgan, and to provide such information routinely would incur high costs.

The Department of Social Security administers benefits for Great Britain only (i.e. England, Scotland, and Wales). Northern Ireland benefits are the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The information that is available for Wales and Great Britain is set out in the attached table.

I hope this reply is helpful.

	June 1998	July 1998	August 1998
Wales			
Entitlement withdrawn	56	60	45
Total decisions made in month	1,881	1,946	1,710
Percentage withdrawn against total decisions made	2.98	3.08	2.63
Great Britain			
Entitlement withdrawn	4,298	4,605	3,406
Total decisions made in month	46,859	47,566	40,051
Percentage withdrawn against total decisions made	9.17	9.68	8.50

	June 1999	July 1999	August 1999
Wales			
Entitlement withdrawn	43	47	48
Total decisions made in month	2,129	2,482	1,905
Percentage withdrawn against total decisions made	2.02	1.89	2.52
Great Britain			
Entitlement withdrawn	3,733	3,838	3,750
Total decisions made in month	46,174	49,870	45,286
Percentage withdrawn against total decisions made	8.08	7.70	8.28

Housing and Council Tax Benefits

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received about the performance of CSL in relation to the administration of housing and council tax benefits. [100227]

Angela Eagle: Taunton Deane Borough Council has informed the Department about the level of CSL's performance in their area. The Authority is closely monitoring the situation and has established a clear path forward to secure improvements in the level of CSL's performance. The Authority will keep the Department informed of all significant developments.

HEALTH

Nursing Statistics

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* nurses, *(b)* community psychiatric nurses, *(c)* district nurses, *(d)* health visitors and *(e)* midwives there are per capita in each health authority area; and what was the total health spending per capita in each area in (i) the last year for which figures are available and (ii) 1997. [99912]

Mr. Denham: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns 473–75W on the health spending per capita per health authority area. Data on the numbers of nurses, community psychiatric nurses, district nurses, health visitors and midwives per capita in each health authority area are shown in the tables.

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): All Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff, per 1,000 population, by Health Authority, in England as at 30 September 1997

whole-time equivalent per 1,000 population

	Total Nursing, midwifery and health visiting	*Total Nurses*	*Registered Midwife*	*Health Visitor*	*District Nurse*	*Community Psychiatric Nurse*
England Total	6.91	6.34	0.37	0.20	0.23	0.22
Avon	5.83	5.29	0.35	0.17	0.19	0.12
Barking and Havering	6.67	6.20	0.29	0.18	0.13	0.23
Barnet	5.52	5.06	0.31	0.19	0.22	1.05
Barnsley	6.77	6.11	0.40	0.26	0.18	0.18
Bedfordshire	5.18	4.65	0.33	0.20	0.20	0.09
Berkshire	5.64	5.12	0.31	0.21	0.25	0.11
Bexley and Greenwich	5.85	5.18	0.42	0.26	0.39	0.21
Birmingham	10.06	9.29	0.58	0.21	0.35	0.19
Bradford	6.98	6.17	0.54	0.27	0.21	0.23
Brent and Harrow	5.30	4.84	0.28	0.17	0.13	0.11
Bromley	6.75	6.28	0.27	0.17	0.17	0.84
Buckinghamshire	5.15	4.60	0.31	0.24	0.21	0.25
Bury and Rochdale	5.88	5.16	0.49	0.21	0.33	0.13
Calderdale and Kirklees	6.25	5.63	0.40	0.22	0.19	0.15
Cambridge and Huntingdon	5.27	4.92	0.26	0.09	0.15	0.15
Camden and Islington	17.63	16.97	0.38	0.27	0.11	0.27
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	5.89	5.31	0.37	0.21	0.12	0.27
County Durham	6.10	5.74	0.28	0.10	0.12	0.10
Coventry	7.82	7.19	0.46	0.16	0.16	0.03
Croydon	5.66	4.95	0.42	0.30	0.15	'—
Doncaster	7.68	6.96	0.45	0.24	0.17	0.14
Dorset	7.64	7.16	0.26	0.22	0.19	0.19
Dudley	5.81	5.30	0.39	0.16	0.19	0.16
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	4.19	3.74	0.24	0.23	0.23	0.12
East and North Hertfordshire	3.75	3.27	0.30	0.18	0.14	0.12
East Kent	5.82	5.45	0.28	0.08	0.08	1.02
East Lancashire	8.92	8.16	0.47	0.29	0.31	0.16
East London and The City	8.01	7.17	0.58	0.26	0.28	0.13
East Norfolk	6.63	6.26	0.24	0.13	0.21	0.18
East Riding	6.68	6.12	0.38	0.17	0.17	0.80
East Surrey	6.41	5.98	0.26	0.17	0.17	0.17
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	6.33	5.98	0.15	0.20	0.28	0.41
Enfield and Haringey	5.75	5.20	0.39	0.14	0.19	0.21
Gateshead and South Tyneside	6.95	6.30	0.39	0.25	0.34	0.17
Gloucestershire	6.99	6.42	0.34	0.21	0.25	0.20
Herefordshire	6.62	6.08	0.36	0.18	0.30	0.18
Hillingdon	7.30	6.45	0.84	'—	'—	0.16
Isle of Wight	7.39	6.75	0.40	0.16	0.32	0.32
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	16.87	15.81	0.61	0.45	0.43	0.43
Kingston and Richmond	1.55	1.46	'—	0.12	0.09	0.06
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	8.25	7.58	0.43	0.23	0.31	0.05
Leeds	7.95	7.42	0.32	0.19	0.14	0.14
Leicestershire	6.87	6.35	0.32	0.19	0.14	0.48
Lincolnshire	5.49	5.10	0.21	0.18	0.21	0.18
Liverpool	9.90	9.21	0.41	0.28	0.28	0.15

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): All Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff, per 1,000 population, by Health Authority, in England as at 30 September 1997

whole-time equivalent per 1,000 population

	Total Nursing, midwifery and health visiting	*Total Nurses*	*Registered Midwife*	*Health Visitor*	*District Nurse*	*Community Psychiatric Nurse*
Manchester	14.36	13.26	0.87	0.21	0.30	0.28
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	9.91	9.02	0.58	0.32	0.32	0.26
Morecambe Bay	8.06	7.58	0.29	0.19	0.39	0.19
Newcastle and North Tyneside	11.29	10.53	0.55	0.21	0.25	0.15
North and East Devon	7.39	6.85	0.38	0.17	0.29	0.21
North and Mid Hampshire	4.58	4.13	0.31	0.14	0.20	0.13
North Cheshire	6.00	5.26	0.38	0.32	0.45	0.22
North Cumbria	6.36	5.86	0.38	0.16	0.25	0.13
North Derbyshire	6.29	5.81	0.27	0.22	0.19	0.11
North Essex	6.80	6.32	0.31	0.16	0.28	0.20
North Nottinghamshire	6.02	5.56	0.31	0.18	0.15	0.33
North Staffordshire	7.61	7.01	0.38	0.21	0.38	0.17
North West Anglia	9.11	8.60	0.29	0.22	0.32	0.17
North West Lancashire	8.90	8.06	0.58	0.28	0.24	0.24
North Yorkshire	5.48	4.98	0.33	0.18	0.28	0.12
Northamptonshire	5.37	4.82	0.34	0.21	0.23	0.13
Northumberland	8.65	8.16	0.23	0.26	0.26	0.45
Nottingham	8.04	7.37	0.45	0.22	0.37	0.36
Oxfordshire	7.42	6.83	0.36	0.21	0.16	0.20
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	4.85	4.28	0.39	0.18	0.24	0.24
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	5.98	5.45	0.42	0.11	0.27	0.22
Rotherham	7.37	6.82	0.35	0.24	0.20	0.16
Salford and Trafford	9.43	8.74	0.45	0.25	0.38	0.22
Sandwell	5.15	4.64	0.31	0.21	0.21	0.14
Sefton	8.48	8.00	0.48	0.03	0.07	0.24
Sheffield	10.18	9.56	0.43	0.19	0.15	0.13
Shropshire	5.16	4.59	0.35	0.21	0.38	0.14
Solihull	1.90	1.71	[1]	0.20	0.24	0.15
Somerset	4.77	4.34	0.31	0.12	0.18	[1]
South and West Devon	7.16	6.53	0.41	0.22	0.22	0.19
South Cheshire	4.49	4.00	0.37	0.12	0.25	0.09
South Derbyshire	4.54	4.18	0.21	0.16	0.17	0.11
South Essex	6.46	5.95	0.32	0.20	0.28	0.16
South Humber	6.36	5.68	0.45	0.23	0.23	0.13
South Lancashire	5.41	4.83	0.29	0.29	0.35	0.23
South Staffordshire	5.00	4.46	0.31	0.24	0.08	0.20
Southampton and South West Hampshire	7.21	6.71	0.31	0.19	0.15	0.11
St. Helens and Knowsley	5.65	5.16	0.27	0.21	0.18	0.27
Stockport	12.55	10.87	1.03	0.65	0.72	0.24
Suffolk	6.36	5.88	0.27	0.21	0.26	0.20
Sunderland	8.06	7.44	0.38	0.24	0.34	0.17
Tees	8.02	7.38	0.38	0.25	0.27	0.14
Wakefield	8.10	7.44	0.44	0.22	0.22	0.54
Walsall	5.73	5.04	0.46	0.19	0.34	0.23
Warwickshire	4.57	4.09	0.34	0.12	0.18	0.12
West Hertfordshire	4.22	3.84	0.19	0.19	0.11	0.59
West Kent	5.86	5.28	0.39	0.19	0.21	0.14
West Pennine	6.09	5.50	0.36	0.25	0.23	0.19
West Surrey	6.17	5.78	0.17	0.23	0.23	0.27
West Sussex	5.85	5.37	0.28	0.20	0.24	0.13
Wigan and Bolton	3.18	2.76	0.31	0.10	0.09	0.10
Wiltshire	9.03	8.23	0.55	0.25	0.23	0.18
Wirral	8.69	7.96	0.46	0.24	0.21	0.27
Wolverhampton	7.76	7.14	0.41	0.25	0.21	0.17
Worcester and District	6.68	6.01	0.39	0.26	0.34	0.24

[1] less than 0.01 per 1,000 population

Notes:

Figures exclude learners and agency staff.

Total Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff figure includes Practice nurses.

Total Nurses figure include Practice nurses.

Source:

Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): All Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff, per 1,000 population, by Health Authority, in England as at 30 September 1998

whole-time equivalent per 1,000 population

	Total Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff	Total Nurses	Registered Midwife	Health Visitor	District Nurse	Community Psychiatric Nurse
England Total	6.92	6.35	0.37	0.20	0.23	0.23
Avon	5.91	5.43	0.32	0.16	0.18	0.12
Barking and Havering	6.54	6.04	0.31	0.18	0.13	0.36
Barnet	5.37	4.92	0.27	0.15	0.21	0.87
Barnsley	6.88	6.23	0.35	0.26	0.18	0.22
Bedfordshire	5.26	4.71	0.34	0.22	0.18	0.13
Berkshire	5.64	5.09	0.35	0.20	0.22	0.11
Bexley and Greenwich	5.89	5.20	0.46	0.23	0.35	0.49
Birmingham	10.52	9.65	0.65	0.22	0.37	0.21
Bradford	7.16	6.35	0.52	0.27	0.21	0.25
Brent and Harrow	5.45	4.95	0.32	0.17	0.13	0.11
Bromley	6.56	6.06	0.27	0.24	0.20	0.81
Buckinghamshire	5.25	4.74	0.34	0.19	0.15	0.21
Bury and Rochdale	5.98	5.29	0.49	0.20	0.36	0.13
Calderdale and Kirklees	6.39	5.79	0.39	0.22	0.31	0.22
Cambridge and Huntingdon	5.24	4.89	0.26	0.09	0.13	0.15
Camden and Islington	17.25	16.65	0.35	0.24	0.11	0.24
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	5.59	5.02	0.35	0.20	0.12	0.35
County Durham	5.84	5.40	0.30	0.15	0.30	0.07
Coventry	9.13	8.48	0.53	0.16	0.16	0.03
Croydon	5.41	5.03	0.12	0.27	0.15	—
Doncaster	7.92	7.20	0.45	0.24	0.21	0.14
Dorset	7.48	7.00	0.27	0.20	0.19	0.19
Dudley	5.97	5.46	0.35	0.16	0.16	0.19
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	4.53	4.10	0.22	0.21	0.25	0.19
East and North Hertfordshire	3.90	3.40	0.30	0.18	0.14	0.10
East Kent	5.99	5.56	0.25	0.20	0.37	0.37
East Lancashire	8.65	7.88	0.47	0.29	0.29	0.18
East London and The City	7.95	7.20	0.57	0.20	0.20	0.11
East Norfolk	6.67	6.29	0.25	0.13	0.22	0.19
East Riding	6.67	6.13	0.37	0.17	0.17	0.82
East Surrey	7.83	7.22	0.38	0.24	0.21	0.19
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	6.26	5.93	0.15	0.17	0.29	0.54
Enfield and Haringey	5.67	5.16	0.39	0.14	0.19	0.19
Gateshead and South Tyneside	7.19	6.54	0.40	0.25	0.34	0.34
Gloucestershire	7.14	6.57	0.36	0.23	0.22	0.34
Herefordshire	6.43	5.90	0.30	0.24	0.30	0.18
Hillingdon	5.73	5.02	0.72	—	—	0.16
Isle of Wight	7.95	7.40	0.39	0.16	0.39	0.39
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	16.30	15.25	0.64	0.41	0.38	0.38
Kingston and Richmond	2.31	2.19	—	0.12	0.09	0.06
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	8.68	7.85	0.48	0.36	0.47	0.25
Leeds	7.70	7.18	0.33	0.19	0.12	0.14
Leicestershire	6.61	6.12	0.32	0.17	0.12	0.33
Lincolnshire	5.81	5.34	0.29	0.18	0.22	0.16
Liverpool	10.10	9.43	0.39	0.28	0.30	0.15
Manchester	14.10	13.08	0.81	0.23	0.30	0.28
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	8.48	7.58	0.39	0.32	0.19	0.16
Morecambe Bay	8.54	8.06	0.29	0.19	0.35	0.48
Newcastle and North Tyneside	8.83	8.40	0.32	0.11	0.13	0.11
North and East Devon	7.64	7.07	0.40	0.17	0.31	0.23
North and Mid Hampshire	4.51	4.09	0.29	0.13	0.18	0.20
North Cheshire	6.41	5.64	0.42	0.35	0.42	0.22
North Cumbria	6.42	5.92	0.34	0.16	0.22	0.13
North Derbyshire	6.24	5.73	0.27	0.24	0.24	0.16
North Essex	6.84	6.39	0.30	0.17	0.29	0.22
North Nottinghamshire	6.09	5.63	0.28	0.18	0.15	0.33
North Staffordshire	7.89	7.29	0.38	0.21	0.43	0.32
North West Anglia	9.32	8.58	0.48	0.24	0.29	0.22
North West Lancashire	9.05	8.19	0.60	0.28	0.24	0.24
North Yorkshire	4.93	4.51	0.28	0.15	0.24	0.07
Northamptonshire	5.39	4.84	0.36	0.19	0.23	0.13
Northumberland	12.11	11.24	0.45	0.39	0.42	0.42
Nottingham	8.00	7.33	0.47	0.20	0.37	0.26
Oxfordshire	7.10	6.53	0.36	0.21	0.16	0.19
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	5.05	4.48	0.39	0.17	0.13	0.24
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	5.78	5.16	0.44	0.18	0.20	0.20

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): All Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff, per 1,000 population, by Health Authority, in England as at 30 September 1998

whole-time equivalent per 1,000 population

	Total Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff	*Total Nurses*	*Registered Midwife*	*Health Visitor*	*District Nurse*	*Community Psychiatric Nurse*
Rotherham	7.51	6.92	0.35	0.24	0.20	0.16
Salford and Trafford	9.39	8.67	0.45	0.25	0.34	0.25
Sandwell	5.40	4.89	0.31	0.24	0.24	0.21
Sefton	8.62	8.13	0.45	0.03	0.07	0.31
Sheffield	10.20	9.56	0.43	0.21	0.15	0.15
Shropshire	5.32	4.72	0.37	0.23	0.37	0.16
Solihull	1.85	1.65	[1]—	0.19	0.24	0.39
Somerset	4.72	4.27	0.33	0.12	0.16	[1]—
South and West Devon	7.30	6.67	0.41	0.20	0.17	0.31
South Cheshire	4.49	4.00	0.37	0.12	0.27	0.09
South Derbyshire	4.60	4.23	0.21	0.16	0.24	0.11
South Essex	6.40	5.94	0.28	0.18	0.28	0.14
South Humber	6.58	5.93	0.45	0.19	0.23	0.13
South Lancashire	5.21	4.64	0.29	0.29	0.32	0.22
South Staffordshire	5.13	4.63	0.29	0.22	0.10	0.29
Southampton and South West Hampshire	7.21	6.73	0.30	0.18	0.13	0.13
St. Helens and Knowsley	5.59	5.11	0.24	0.21	0.15	0.27
Stockport	12.77	11.20	0.89	0.65	0.72	0.27
Suffolk	6.35	5.89	0.27	0.19	0.22	0.19
Sunderland	8.28	7.66	0.41	0.21	0.31	0.21
Tees	8.54	7.89	0.38	0.27	0.25	0.23
Wakefield	8.31	7.68	0.41	0.22	0.19	0.56
Walsall	5.93	5.21	0.50	0.19	0.34	0.23
Warwickshire	3.79	3.39	0.30	0.10	0.14	0.08
West Hertfordshire	4.14	3.76	0.17	0.19	0.13	0.66
West Kent	5.70	5.17	0.35	0.18	— 0.24	0.26
West Pennine	6.23	5.66	0.32	0.25	0.21	0.19
West Surrey	6.28	5.74	0.31	0.22	0.22	0.25
West Sussex	4.77	4.40	0.24	0.15	0.19	0.09
Wigan and Bolton	3.18	2.79	0.28	0.10	0.09	0.12
Wiltshire	8.75	7.96	0.54	0.25	0.21	0.18
Wirral	8.80	8.16	0.46	0.18	0.18	0.24
Wolverhampton	8.03	7.16	0.62	0.25	0.21	0.17
Worcester and District	7.13	6.43	0.41	0.30	0.35	0.32

[1] less than 0.01 per 1,000 population

Notes:

Figures exclude learners and agency staff.

Total Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff figure includes Practice nurses.

Total Nurses figure includes Practice nurses.

Source:

Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census

Community Pharmacies

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made of the number of community pharmacies expected to close during the year 2000. [99882]

Ms Stuart: During 1998–99 (the last year for which figures are available), 46 pharmacies opened in England to dispense National Health Service prescriptions and 51 closed. No estimate has been made of the number likely to close during 2000.

NHS Hospital Employees

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of nurses working in NHS hospitals on 2 November were *(a)* supplied by agencies and *(b)* employed on short-term fixed-length contracts. [99874]

Mr. Denham: This information is not collected centrally.

Prescriptions

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many prescriptions were tracked for the purposes of charging to primary care group budgets during the first six months of operation of primary care groups; and how many invoices were issued by NHS trusts and health authorities to other NHS bodies during the last six months of the period in which the fundholding and extra-contractual referrals systems were in operation. [99896]

Ms Stuart: The Prescription Pricing Authority estimates that it will charge the cost of some 255 million prescriptions against Primary Care Group prescribing budgets for the six-month period April to September 1999.

The Department does not hold information centrally on the number of invoices issued by National Health Service

trusts and health authorities to other NHS bodies during the last six months of the period in which the fundholding and extra-contractual referrals systems were in operation.

National Screening Committee

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library a copy of the reports of the National Screening Committee inquiries into *(a)* diabetic screening, *(b)* pre-natal screening for cystic fibrosis and *(c)* neonatal screening for cystic fibrosis. [100013]

Mr. Denham: Copies of the National Screening Committee's workshop papers and the Health Technology Assessment report on screening for cystic fibrosis have been placed in the Library. The Library will also have copies of the National Screening Committee's workshop papers on diabetic retinopathy screening. These can also be viewed online at *http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/screening/diabetic-retinopathy/*. The National Screening Committee will consider proposals for screening for type II diabetes, which results from a relative deficiency of, or insensitivity to insulin, later next year.

Intensive Care Units

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on increasing the recruitment of doctors as specialists in intensive care units to allow them to work consecutive days in the week, as recommended in the Audit Commission's report, "Critical to Success". [100195]

Mr. Denham: We are currently carrying out a national review of intensive care services, which will lead to the publication of national standards of care. The review will take account of the range of findings in the Audit Commission's report "Critical to Success", including their findings on the arrangement for medical staffing of intensive care units.

It will be for National Health Service trusts and health authorities, who are responsible for the quality of the services they provide, to determine the number, grade and mix of staff they will require to provide those services. Intensive care medicine became a separate specialty from anaesthetics in June this year. At national level we have been reviewing the numbers of higher specialist training opportunities in both specialties together. We are satisfied that currently, there are enough trainees entering intensive care medicine, for there to be sufficient qualifying for consultant posts over the next few years. We will be reviewing the position in intensive care medicine again next year.

Waiting Times

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many out-patients not yet seen for a first outpatient appointment following GP written referral had been waiting *(a)* longer than 13 weeks and *(b)* longer than 26 weeks at the end of each quarter since June 1996 in the NHS London Region. [100282]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is in the table:

Outpatient figures for London Region

Year ending	*Not yet seen: 13–25 weeks*	*26 weeks plus*
June 1996	31,626	12,585
September 1996	35,549	12,279
December 1996	34,764	13,744
March 1997	30,784	15,057
June 1997	36,185	15,054
September 1997	44,355	15,819
December 1997	43,740	18,101
March 1998	39,744	25,954
June 1998	47,266	16,759
September 1998	54,967	19,383
December 1998	57,406	24,267
March 1999	53,406	27,949
June 1999	58,029	24,315
September 1999	60,451	21,857

Social Exclusion

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he is taking in response to the report published by MIND in November into social exclusion among people with mental illness. [100642]

Mr. Hutton: We welcome the report as a contribution to the debate on social exclusion. The Government have a full programme for tackling the social exclusion of those with mental health problems. Many of the issues in the Inquiry's recommendations are being tackled through the work of the Government's Social Exclusion Unit; the Department's "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation" revised guidance on the streamlined Care Programme Approach; Review of the Mental Health Act 1983; Impact Strategy to reduce stigma, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and Department for Education and Employment/ Department of Social Security initiatives on promoting employment and benefit reforms.

Independent Healthcare Report

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to reply to the Health Committee's Fifth report of Session 1998–99 on Regulation of Private and Other Independent Healthcare (HC 281); and if he will make a statement. [101281]

Ms Stuart: On Friday 3 December the Government will publish their reply to this Report and will also publish "Regulating Private and Voluntary Healthcare: The Way Forward" which sets out the response to our consultation on this subject and our proposals for action. Copies of the documents will be available in the Library on 3 December.

Xenotransplantation

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many applications for xenotransplantation clinical trials have been received and from which companies; how many involve *(a)* transgenic tissue and *(b)* transgenic organs; from which animals these materials come; and for each category how many permissions have been granted. [100704]

Mr. Denham: To date, the United Kingdom Xenotransplantation Interim Regulatory Authority (UKXIRA) has received one application which complies with the requirements set out in "Guidance on making proposals to conduct xenotransplantation on human subjects". Following initial consideration by the UKXIRA, the applicant subsequently advised the authority of their intention not to pursue the application. Two other applicants have been advised to re-submit their applications in accordance with the requirements described in the guidance.

Details of applications submitted to the UKXIRA are supplied in confidence. An announcement will be made if an application is approved.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funds have been committed to research and development of the use of organs from GM pigs. [100706]

Mr. Denham: The Medical Research Council (MRC), which receives its grant in aid from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, has funded two projects related to xenotransplantation:

Between 1993 and 1998, £500,000 was allocated to: "Germ Line modification of pig organs for human transplantation" conducted by the BBSRC Babraham Institute.

In 1998–99, £50,000 was allocated to: "Endogenous retroviruses of pigs and xenotransplantation" conducted by the Institute of Cancer Research and the MRC National Institute for Medical Research.

The Department is directly funding a further project. In 1999–2000, £149,000 was allocated to: "An investigation into the ability of porcine endogenous retroviruses to infect animals other than pigs" being conducted by the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research.

Organ Donation

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he has taken to investigate methods of addressing the shortage of human donor organs other than by the use of transgenic pigs; what his policy is on an opt-out donor card; and if he will make a statement. [100705]

Mr. Denham: The Organ Donor Publicity Campaign was launched in October 1998 and was reinforced in February by a campaign targeting the South Asian community. We shall continue to build on these campaigns to encourage people to join the National Health Service Organ Donor Register, to carry the Donor Card at all times and most importantly make their wishes known to their family and friends.

We shall be developing a further campaign to inform the medical profession about best practice in requesting organ donation. Additionally, in line with the drive to improve the quality of care for all users of the NHS, we shall seek to ensure that best practice is adopted in all units involved in donation and transplantation. We shall also support best practice in live donation, which has increased significantly over the last few years.

While there is some support for an opt-out system of donation, the medical profession is divided and there are still many people who are not in favour of it. A survey undertaken this year has shown that there is still significantly more public support for the current system of donation than for opt-out.

We will continue to keep an open mind on all options for increasing donation rates. However, before introducing any measure aimed at increasing the supply of organs we would have to be sure that it commands public confidence.

Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the review of sections 17(2) and 18 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970 has been completed; and if he will make a statement. [100923]

Mr. Hutton: These provisions require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament each year on the number of disabled people aged under 65 who received long-term care in a hospital (or a part of a hospital) vested in the Secretary of State and used wholly or mainly for the care of elderly people (section 17(2)); and were supported by their local authority in residential care used by people of 65 or over (section 18(3)).

(By virtue of section 45 of the Government of Wales Act 1999, reports on the position in Wales are now for the National Assembly of Wales to publish, rather than for the Secretary of State to make to Parliament. In Scotland, this is a matter for the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament).

Reports to Parliament under section 17(2) ceased after 1995 because the establishment of National Health Service trusts meant that there were no longer any hospitals "vested in the Secretary of State". Reports to Parliament under section 18 continue but show a considerable drop in the number of under-65s accommodated with over-65s. The figures they report are no longer, if they ever were, an unambiguous indicator of "inappropriate placements". (For example, if the caring decision is taken to allow a person who has reached his 65 birthday to stay in a home where he may have lived for several years, all the residents in the home who are aged under 65 will be included in the figures).

The Government therefore made clear, when making their report under section 18 last year, that they were minded to repeal these two provisions and would welcome any views on this proposal. Copies of the responses received have been placed in the Library. The majority support the proposal for repeal, some also noting that the system for registering care homes is a much more effective way of ensuring appropriate placements than statistical reports. Having considered all the responses, the Government have decided that repeal is the right option, and will pursue this when parliamentary time allows.

Malnourishment

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the health problems caused by malnourishment. [100711]

Ms Stuart: Malnourishment includes undernourishment and obesity. Both of these are associated with ill health and mortality. Undernourishment can delay recovery from

illness and increases susceptibility to osteoporosis and infection, whilst obesity is a risk factor for coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, gall bladder disease, some cancers and arthritis.

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what motor mileage allowance rates her Department offers to *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* civil servants using their own vehicles for official business; and what has been the cost of each in each of the last five years. [98724]

Mr. Stringer: The current motor mileage allowance rates offered by the Cabinet Office, its agencies and the Central Office of Information to Ministers and civil servants using their own vehicles for official business are as follows. Cabinet Office Ministers, when travelling on official business, may use a private car instead of an official car, and claim mileage allowance in the same circumstances and on the same terms as civil servants in the central department.

There were no payments to Ministers in 1997–98 and 1998–99. Payments to civil servants in 1997–98 and 1998–99 totalled £368,000 and £412,000 respectively. The information for the previous three years is not available in the form requested and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Pence per mile

Cabinet Office Ministers and civil servants (excluding civil servants in the Agencies)[1]	*Up to 4,000 miles*	*Over 4,000 miles*
Motor car up to 1500cc	34	19
Motor car over 1500cc	43	23
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations up to 125cc Third Party insurance	14.6	6.1
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations over 125cc Third Party insurance	22.1	9.0
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations up to 125cc Comprehensive insurance	16.2	6.1
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations over 125cc Comprehensive insurance	25.3	9.0
Passenger supplement—first passenger	2p per mile (flat rate)	
Passenger supplement—each additional passenger	1p per mile (flat rate)	
Equipment supplement	2p per mile (flat rate)	
Public transport rate[2]	—	—

[1] The above rates do not apply to Security Facilities Division. The motor mileage rates for Security Facilities Division are 36p per mile up to 10,000 miles and 28p per mile thereafter with a passenger allowance of 2p per mile (no equipment supplement).
[2] There is no public transport rate. The maximum payable would be the equivalent public transport costs.

Pence per mile

Civil servants in the Civil Service College	*Up to 4,000 miles*	*Over 4,000 miles*
Motor car up to 1500cc	35	20
Motor car over 1500cc	45	25
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations up to 125cc Third Party insurance	14.6	6.1
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations over 125cc Third Party insurance	22.1	9.0
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations up to 125cc Comprehensive insurance	16.2	6.1
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations over 125cc Comprehensive insurance	25.3	9.0
Passenger supplement—first passenger	2p per mile (flat rate)	
Passenger supplement—each additional passenger	1p per mile (flat rate)	
Equipment supplement	2p per mile (flat rate)	
Public transport rate	26p (flat rate)	

Pence per mile

Civil servants in the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency	*Up to 4,000 miles*	*Over 4,000 miles*
Motor car up to 1500cc	35.7	18
Motor car 1501cc-2000cc	42	22
Motor car over 2000cc	46	30
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations up to 125cc Third Party insurance	14.6	6.1
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations over 125cc Third Party insurance	22.1	9.0
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations up to 125cc Comprehensive insurance	16.2	6.1
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations over 125cc Comprehensive insurance	25.3	9.0
Passenger supplement—first passenger	2p per mile (flat rate)	
Passenger supplement—each additional passenger	1p per mile (flat rate)	
Equipment supplement	n/a	
Public transport rate	23p (flat rate)	

Pence per mile

Civil servants in the Government Car and Despatch Agency	*Up to 4,000 miles*	*Over 4,000 miles*
Motor car up to 1500cc	34	18
Motor car 1501cc-2000cc	43	23
Motor car over 2000cc	47	30
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations up to 125cc	14.5	6.2
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations over 125cc	22.8	9.0
Passenger supplement—first passenger	n/a	
Passenger supplement—each additional passenger	n/a	
Equipment supplement	n/a	
Public transport rate	23.8p (flat rate)	

Pence per mile

Civil servants or Property Advisers to the Civil Estate	*Up to 4,000 miles*	*Over 4,000 miles*
Motor car up to 1500cc	34	19
Motor car 1501cc-2000cc	43	23
Motor car over 2000cc	47	30
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations up to 125cc Third Party insurance	14.5	6.2
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations over 125cc Third Party insurance	22.8	9.0
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations up to 125cc Comprehensive insurance	16.2	6.2
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations over 125cc Comprehensive insurance	25.3	9.0
Passenger supplement—first passenger	2p per mile (flat rate)	
Passenger supplement—each additional passenger	1p per mile (flat rate)	
Equipment supplement	2p per mile (flat rate)	
Public transport rate	23.8	

Pence per mile

Civil servants in the Central Office of Information	*Up to 4,000 miles*	*Over 4,000 miles*
Motor cars	40	21
Motor cycles and motor cycle combinations	23.8p (flat rate)	
Passenger supplement—first passenger	2p per mile (flat rate)	
Passenger supplement—each additional passenger	1p per mile (flat rate)	
Equipment supplement	n/a	
Public transport rate	23.8p (flat rate)	

Civil Servants in the Buying Agency

The Buying Agency pay a flat 30p per mile to all civil servants using their own vehicle for official business with a passenger supplement of 2p per passenger (no equipment supplement).

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how much her Department has spent on ministerial transport in each of the last two years; [98718]

(2) on civil servants' transport in each of the last two years. [98719]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Government Car and Despatch Agency. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. Nick Matheson, to write to my hon. Friend.

The cost of private car services for Cabinet Office Ministers in 1997–98 was £3,050.77. The cost of private car services for Cabinet Office Ministers in 1998–99 was £1,694.56.

The Cabinet Office (excluding Security Facilities Division) spent £3,786,000 on civil servants' transport in 1997–98 and £4,001,000 in 1998–99. This is mainly based on actual expenditure, but includes a small number of estimates where exact figures are not available. The figures for Security Facilities Division and Central Office of Information are not readily available, and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost. All travel undertaken by civil servants complies with the requirements of the Civil Service Management Code.

Letter from Nick Matheson to Dr. Lynne Jones, dated November 1999:

The Minister of State has asked me in my capacity as Chief Executive of the Government Car and Despatch Agency to reply to your Parliamentary Question about how much has been spent on ministerial transport in each of the last two years.

The total cost of providing the Government Car Service was £7.79 million in 1997/98 and £8.06 million in 1998/99. The total costs for allocated services to all ministers were £4.30 million in 1997/98 and £4.32 million in 1998/99. These costs also include non-ministerial use such as the movement of documents and for use by officials as directed by the ministerial private office. The total costs for allocated services to senior officials were £740,000 in 1997/98 and £950,000 in 1998/99. The remaining costs in both years covered other services provided by the Government Car Service.

The Government Car and Despatch Agency charges customer departments for the services provided on a basis that recovers all costs.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Macedonia

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what procedure citizens of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have to undertake in order to obtain a visa to visit the United Kingdom. [100322]

Mr. Vaz: Skopje offers only a limited service because of accommodation constraints. Applications are accepted from diplomats; those seeking urgent medical treatment; British Government and British Council sponsored visitors, and refugee cases accepted by either UNHCR or the Home Office. Other Macedonian nationals who wish to visit the UK may apply at any other visa issuing Post.

Falklands

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he intends to have further discussions with the Argentine Government regarding a common fisheries agreement for the Falkland Islands; and if he will make a statement. [100019]

Mr. Battle: The Falkland Islands Government regulates fishing in Falkland Islands waters. However, the British and Argentine Governments have agreed the need for longer-term measures to ensure the sustainability of fish stocks in the high seas of the South West Atlantic and that this should be achieved through the establishment of a multilateral fisheries regime. The European Commission has an on-going dialogue with the Argentine Government on proposals for such an arrangement. We actively support these discussions and we raised the issue at the recent South Atlantic Fisheries Commission in Buenos Aires on 25 and 26 November 1999.

Turkey

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the security situation in Turkey following the announcement by the PKK of its withdrawal from armed struggle. [100009]

Mr. Vaz: We receive regular reporting from the British Embassy in Ankara on the security situation in Turkey. Following the recent declaration by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that it will end its armed struggle, the security situation has improved, but isolated clashes between PKK members and Turkish Armed Forces are still occurring.

The British Government welcome the PKK's declaration. However, we believe that it is still too early to assess whether the armed struggle is in reality at an end.

International Criminal Court

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what is the timetable for publication of the draft legislation on the International Criminal Court; and what consultation he will hold about this legislation; [100657]

(2) what is the timetable for publication of the draft legislation on the International Criminal Court. [100653]

Mr. Hain: Draft legislation to enable ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) will be published in the course of this parliamentary session. After publication, all parliamentarians, organisations and individuals interested in the ICC will be given an opportunity to comment.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the Government intends to ratify the International Criminal Court Treaty. [100652]

Mr. Hain: The UK requires legislation before we can ratify the International Criminal Court Statute. This legislation will be published in draft form in the current parliamentary session and introduced as soon as the parliamentary timetable allows.

British Trade International

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the markets which have been selected by British Trade International for special promotion; and what plans he has to develop British trade in each of these. [100654]

Mr. Battle: The following tables list those markets identified as Target Markets by British Trade International and gives details of the strategies which are being implemented for each market:

(a) Under-exploited and newly emerging markets for more experienced exporters

Countries	*Promotional launch*	*Strategies*
Brazil (in the context of Mercosur)	November 1998	Provide reliable and impartial information about opportunities and risks in the market; awareness raising events in the UK; improve exporters' market specific skills (eg languages, marketing)
Central Europe		
Poland	February 1999	Under this two-year campaign, each country is the subject of an individual market initiative, this includes a London-based launch conference in partnership with the CBI, an in-market launch event and a series of UK regional seminars delivered in partnership with local business organisations, focusing on the detail of doing business in the market, both as an exporter and as an investor; the programme also includes a sector-based approach: main focus on automotive and electronic components, infrastructure projects, financial services, environment and consumer goods and retail
Hungary	October 1999	
Czech Republic	February 2000	

(a) Under-exploited and newly emerging markets for more experienced exporters

Countries	*Promotional launch*	*Strategies*
China/Hong Kong		
China	January 1998	A 2-year programme of awareness raising events in every region of the UK; an intensive programme of sector-focused activity
Hong Kong	January 1998	Promote Hong Kong's role as a gateway for British companies wanting to access the China market; focus on the expanding range of opportunities in IT and related sectors; promote the opportunities in Hong Kong's massive infrastructure plans promote Britain as a source for quality consumer goods including fashion
Egypt	November 1998	Raise the profile of Egypt as a destination for UK services, products and investment; improve the flow and quality of market and sector information available, principally to SMEs; develop a viable Business Council (commercially-driven and led); encourage the formation of SME joint-ventures and other forms of partnership
India	January 1993	Plans are in hand to widen the scope of the Indo-British Partnership which promotes exports and investment. The new programme will be announced by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he visits India in January 2000
Japan	April 1998	Help British companies win business in Japan and with Japanese companies worldwide; cross-sectoral themes of high technology support for UK businesses setting up in Japan and assistance to companies to invest directly in Japan and set up facilities there
Mexico	November 1999 (in Mexico) January 2000 (in UK)	Develop an SME partnership programme in priority sectors; special focus on the use of electronic media, with the development of a number of virtual trade promotion concepts; support for regional links between organisations and businesses in the UK and Mexico
South Africa	May 1998	Close co-operation with the South African Department of Trade and Industry to promote trade and investment partnerships; major Partnership Week events in South Africa, focusing on PFI opportunities; UK/South African SME partnership programme, developing linkages with previously disadvantaged groups; 'thinksouthafrica' gateway website
Taiwan	April 1999	Focus on events in the UK and Taiwan (including inward and outward missions) across a small number of priority sectors
Turkey	June 1998	Awareness raising activities and events in the UK; assist the promotion of the Turkish market through relationships between representative bodies in the UK and Turkey.

(b) Markets for new and inexperienced exporters

Countries	*Promotional launch*	*Strategies*
United States of America	November 1998	Export USA aims to give small companies, particularly those with innovative products, services or processes, the confidence to tackle the market effectively. Firms pay £1,000 for: on-going contact with Commercial Officers; market assessment and advice; short marketing course at a university business school; visit to a trade fair or conference in the USA; and assistance with commercial publicity
Canada	December 1999	Export Canada will be broadly similar to Export USA, but will place greater emphasis on new exporters
Western Europe	September 1998	The Export Explorer scheme has been developed for new and inexperienced exporters aimed at Western Europe. It is delivered through Business Links and other intermediaries at a cost to the company of £99 plus travel. The package is delivered as: Market Explorer, offering companies the opportunity to visit one of the easy access starter markets of the Republic of Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries,; Trade Fair Explorer, which helps firms to visit one of the major trade exhibitions in Western Europe; a continuous programme of sector initiatives, using British Trade International's 18-strong team of Export Promoters for Western Europe

Chinese President (State Visit)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had with President Jiang Zemin during his recent visit regarding protecting the environment *(a)* nationally and *(b)* globally. [100635]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and President Jiang Zemin agreed that protecting the environment was one of a number of common challenges on which closer co-operation was desirable.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he discussed with President Jiang Zemin during his recent visit the situation in Hong Kong since its handover in 1997. [100639]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed Hong Kong with the Chinese Foreign Minister and with the Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Office of the State Council who accompanied President Jiang Zemin on his State Visit, making clear our continued commitment to the values of the Joint Declaration. The two sides agreed that the concept of "One Country, Two Systems" was working in practice.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had with President Jiang Zemin during his recent visit regarding China's role in the UN Security Council. [100634]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and President Jiang Zemin agreed on the need for close consultations on international issues, as Permanent Members of the UN Security Council, in their meeting on 21 October.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had with President Jiang Zemin during his recent visit regarding China's role in South East Asian security. [100636]

Mr. Battle: South East Asian security was not discussed in any detail during the State Visit.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what agreements he signed with President Jiang Zemin during his recent visit. [100633]

Mr. Battle: None.

China

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the work of the British Council in China in the last 10 years. [100640]

Mr. Battle: The work of the British Council in China has consistently been of a very high standard and has performed an invaluable role in promoting British culture and education in China. The Council make a major contribution to promoting links between China and the United Kingdom in areas of reform including in law and governance and in supporting rapidly growing British involvement in China's education and training markets. The Council's arts activities promote a positive image of Britain in China as demonstrated by the series of events staged during my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's visit to China in October 1998.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to encourage further academic exchanges with China. [100637]

Mr. Battle: Academic and educational exchanges are an important part of our deepening relationship with China. A number of steps are being taken to encourage further academic links with China. These include:

(a) As part of the Prime Minister's initiative we are planning to increase the number of Chinese students in this country from 5,000 to 20,000.

(b) The British Council's Academic Links with China Scheme (funded by DFID) supports 33 active academic links. A recent visit to China of senior UK academics organised by the British Council has resulted in agreement with the Chinese Ministry of Education to establish a new framework for institutional collaboration.

(c) The Chevening Scholarship Scheme will be expanded and used to support some 120 awards in China.

(d) There are a number of projects devoted to professional development and training in China. These include: the BOND scheme (funded by BTI) which expects to make 25 industrial placements from China each year, the Financial Sector Training Scheme (funded by DFID) which aims to train 225 financial professionals in the UK over four years.

The British Council will hold a number of high profile education events in China in 2000 including a British education festival in Beijing and Shanghai in February that will involve over 90 British institutions. Follow up to the Council's Lifelong Learning festival held in November this year in China will focus on academic co-operation and exchanges particularly for distance and vocational learning.

Mrs. Leyla Zana

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last discussed the imprisonment of Mrs. Leyla Zana with the Turkish authorities. [100764]

Mr. Vaz: The British Embassy in Ankara has been following the case of Mrs. Zana closely since her arrest in 1994. In particular, we have noted that Mrs. Zana and those MPs convicted on similar charges were awarded compensation by the European Court of Human Rights for breaches of the Convention of Human Rights. These breaches related to detention length and legality of detention.

We have made a number of representations to the Turkish authorities since she was first put on trial and will continue to do so.

Mr. Abdullah Nouri

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Iranian authorities regarding the political trial of Abdullah Nouri; and what assessment he has made of

the implications of the trial for *(a)* United Kingdom-Iran relations and *(b)* the parliamentary elections promised for February. [100617]

Mr. Hain: We and our EU partners have been following closely the trial by the Court of the Clergy of Abdullah Nouri, for which sentence was passed on 28 November.

How Mr. Nouri's sentencing to five years imprisonment will effect February's Majles elections is a matter for speculation. We hope that the elections will take place in as free and fair conditions as possible. It is too early to say what impact Mr. Nouri's conviction will have on UK/Iran relations.

Bahrain

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what issues of human rights and democracy he raised with the Amir of Bahrain during his recent visit to Britain. [100666]

Mr. Hain: Human rights were raised with the Amir as part of our policy of constructive engagement on such issues. We welcomed the positive steps Shaikh Hamad has taken towards improving Bahrain's human rights situation since his accession and offered our assistance and advice.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what human rights abuses he raised with the Amir of Bahrain during his visit. [100805]

Mr. Hain: Human rights were raised as part of our policy of constructive engagement on such issues. We welcomed the positive steps the Amir has taken towards improving Bahrain's human rights situation since his accession and offered our assistance and advice.

EU Council Business

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for *(a)* December and *(b)* the major European Union events for the next six months. [101185]

Mr. Vaz: The business is as follows:

Monthly forecast of EU business: December 1999

29 November-3 December—Seattle—WTO Ministerial Conference

No formal agenda

1–2 December—Brussels—European Parliament Plenary

Consultation procedure

(possible) Proposal for a Council regulation regarding the implementation of measures to intensify the EC-Turkey Customs Union

(possible) Council Act establishing the Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters between the member states of the European Union

Proposal for a Council decision concerning the approval, on behalf of the Community, of the amendments to the Annexes to the Convention on the protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (Helsinki Convention)

(possible) Proposal for a Council Directive on the marketing of forest reproductive material

(possible) Proposal for a Council regulation amending Regulation (EC) No. 2201/96 on the common organisation of the markets in processed fruit and vegetable products

(possible) Proposal for a Council regulation on the common organisation of the markets in fishery and aquaculture products

Proposal for a Council regulation amending for the third time Regulation (EC) No. 850/98 of 30 March 1998 for the conservation of fishery resources through technical measures for the protection of juveniles of marine organisms

Proposals for a Council regulation amending Regulation (EC) No. 2596/97 extending the period provided for in Article 149(1) of the Act of Accession of Austria, Finland and Sweden

Codecision procedure

First reading

(possible) Proposal for a European Parliament and Council regulation regarding the implementation of measures to promote economic and social development in Turkey

(possible) Proposal for European Parliament and Council Directive relating to limit values for benzene and carbon monoxide in ambient air

Codecision procedure

Second reading

(possible) Common position adopted by the Council with a view to adopting a European Parliament and Council decision establishing a scheme to monitor the average specific emissions of CO_2 from new passenger cars

Codecision procedure

Third reading

(possible) Joint text approved by the Conciliation Committee for a European Parliament and Council Directive on minimum requirements for improving the safety and health protection of workers potential at risk from explosive atmospheres

2 December—Brussels—Energy Council

1. Adoption of the provisional agenda
2. (possible) Approval of the list of "A" items
3. Strategy for integrating environmental aspects and sustainable development into energy policy
   Report to the Helsinki European Council
4. Directive 96/92/EC concerning common rules for the internal market in electricity: State of implementation and harmonisation requirements
   Information from the Commission and adoption of Council Conclusions
5. Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and the Council on energy efficiency requirements for ballast for fluorescent lighting
   Orientation debate
   doc. 9564/99 ENER 81 ENV 242 CODEC 373
6. Communication from the Commission: Strengthening the Northern dimension of European energy policy
   Presentation by the Commission and adoption of Council Conclusions
   doc. 12805/99 ENER 123 RELEX 44
7. Access for electricity from renewables to the internal electricity market
   Information from the Commission
8. Directive 98/30/EC concerning common rules for the internal market in natural gas: Harmonisation report
   Presentation by the Commission
9. Communication from the Commission on security of EU gas supply
   Presentation by the Commission
   doc. 12896/99 ENER 124
10. Energy Charter Treaty
    Progress report
    (possible) Adoption of Negotiating Directives on an Agreement on Transit (Item on which a vote may be requested)

11. Any Other Business:
(a) Millennium bug
Information from the Commission
(b) Community Energy efficiency action plan
Information from the Commission

Possible "A" items:

1. European Parliament and Council Decision adopting a multiannual programme for the promotion of energy efficiency—SAVE programme
Adoption
2. European Parliament and Council Decision adopting a multiannual programme for the promotion of renewable energy sources in the Community—ALTENER programme
Adoption

2 December—Brussels—Research Council

1. Adoption of the agenda
2. (possible) Approval of the list of "A" items
3. Implementation of the 4th and 5th research Framework Programmes
(a) Overview of the 4th Framework Programme
(b) Outcome of the initial calls for proposals under the 5th Framework Programme
(c) Participation of the applicant CCEE and Cyprus in the 5th Framework Programme
Commission reports and exchange of views
4. Preparation for future research Framework Programmes
(a) Information from the Commission
(b) Information from the Presidency
(c) Exchange of views
(d) Approval of the Council conclusions
12370/99 RECH 105 ATO 102 + COR 1 (d)
5. European space strategy
adoption of a Council Resolution
9125/99 RECH 80 ECO 226 TRANS 144
6. Waste management and decommissioning of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) installations
approval of Council conclusions
11269/99 RECH 98 ATO 93
+ COR 1 (fi)
+ COR 2 (s)
7. Additional research programme for the high-flux reactor (HFR) at Petten (2000–03)
8. Other business
ASEM Ministerial Conference, 14 and 15 October 1999: information from the Presidency and the Commission

Possible "A" items:

Adoption of Council Decisions concerning:

the conclusion of a scientific and technological co-operation agreement with Argentina

the conclusion of a scientific and technological co-operation agreement with China

the conclusion of a scientific and technological co-operation agreement with Russia

2 December—Brussels—Justice and Home Affairs Council

1. Adoption of the Agenda
2. Approval of the list of "A" items
3. Tampere follow-up:
Information on the state of preparation of the 'scoreboard'
4. Draft Convention on mutual assistance in criminal matters between the member states of the European Union
doc. 13451/99 COPEN 60
5. Draft Framework Decision on increasing protection by penal sanctions against counterfeiting in connection with the introduction of the euro
doc. 13450/99 DROIPEN 21
6. Initiative for a Council Regulation on insolvency proceedings
doc. 13465/99 JUSTCIV 177 MI 120
7. Proposal for a Council Regulation on the Service in the member states of judicial and extra-judicial documents in civil or commercial matters
docs
13466/99 JUSTCIV 178
8671/99 JUSTCIV 81
8. Organised crime:
(a) The Prevention and Control of Organised Crime: A European Union Strategy for the beginning of the new Millennium—oral report
(b) 1998 EU Organised Crime Situation Report—oral report
9. Eurodac—Regulation on comparison of fingerprints of asylum applicants and certain other aliens
doc. 13408/99 EURODAC 24
10. Draft negotiation mandate on Dublin parallel agreement with Norway and Iceland
adoption[1]
doc. 13407/99 ASILE 42
11. Admission: Commission proposal on family reunification
Presentation by the Commission
12. Council Decision concerning the UK application to participate in some of the provisions of the Schengen acquis[1]
doc. 11177/4/99 SCHENGEN 74 REV 4
13. Europol:
Future activities of Europol after Tampere European Council
Information from the Presidency
14. Adoption of the decisions discussed in the Mixed Committee at Ministerial level[1] (after the Mixed Committee meeting)[1]
15. Proposal for a directive on electronic commerce—criminal law aspects:
Information by the Swedish delegation
doc. 13309/99 JAI 103 MI 119
16. Measures to combat child sex tourism
doc. 12629/99 JEUN 65 TOUR 10 JAI 96
17. Any Other Business

6–7 December—Brussels—General Affairs Council

Adoption of the provisional agenda

Approval of the list of "A" items

Horizontal issues

Resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament at its part-sessions in Brussels on 3–4 November 1999 and Strasbourg on 15–19 November 1999

Preparation of the Helsinki European Council (10–11 December 1999)
Overall co-ordination
Common strategies

European Security and Defence Policy: Presidency reports on military and non-military aspects of crisis management
Enlargement
Presidency report on the Intergovernmental Conference
An effective Council for an enlarged Union

Draft Statute for MEPs

EP electoral procedure

External relations

Negotiations for a development partnership agreement with the ACP states
= Financial allocation for the 9th European Development Fund
= Trade co-operation

Indonesia

Transatlantic Relations

Western Balkans

Items likely to become "A" items

Enlargement
Adoption of EU common position with a view to the Accession Conferences with Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Slovenia at Ministerial level on 7 December 1999

Association with Hungary
Establishment of the EU position for the 6th Association Council meeting on 7 December 1999

Association with Poland
Establishment of the EU position for the 6th Association Council meeting on 7 December 1999

Association with the Czech Republic
Establishment of the EU position for the 5th Association Council meeting on 7 December 1999

Arms destruction: joint action (Russian Strategy)

TACIS: adoption of new regulation

6–7 December—Brussels—Internal Market Council

Strategy for the Internal Market
Presentation by the Commission—Exchange of views

Joint Work Programme of the Three Presidencies (FIN, P, F)
Progress report—Exchange of views

Scoreboard (new version)
Presentation by the Commission—Exchange of views

SLIM Initiative—phase IV
Presentation by the Commission—Exchange of views

Mutual recognition of diplomas (SLIM Directive)—Political agreement

Copyright in the information society—Progress report

Directive on legal aspects of electronic commerce—Political agreement

Resale right—Political agreement

Take-over bids—Political agreement

Community Customs Code—Political agreement

Directive on distance selling of financial services—Political agreement

Parallel imports/Exhaustion of trade mark rights—Oral report

Public Procurement—Progress report by the Commission

(possible) Buses and coaches—Political agreement

Revision of chemical product policy—Presentation by the Commission

Follow-up to the Council Resolution on Standardisation

Vertical Directives on foodstuffs
Sugars
Preserved milk
(possible) fruit juices—Political agreement

(possible) Regulation on data protection within EU institutions
Progress report

Any Other Business

7 December—Brussels—Accession Conferences with Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Slovenia

No formal agenda

7 December—Brussels—Association Councils with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland

No agenda yet available

7–8 December—Brussels—3rd EU-ACP Ministerial Conference

No formal agenda

9–10 December—Luxembourg—Transport Council

1. Adoption of draft agenda
2. Approval of "A" points

Maritime transport

3. Short Sea Shipping—Commission Communication
Council Conclusions/Resolution

Horizontal issues

4. Intermodality and intermodal freight transport
Commission Communication
Council conclusions

Land transport

5. Railways
(a) Rail infrastructure package[1]—Common position
(b) Rail interoperability—Commission Communication and draft directive
Debate
(c) Alleviation of rail bottlenecks
Commission presentation and exchange of views
6. Working time in road transport
Commission report and debate

Air transport

7. Aviation noise: short and long-term problems
Briefing by Commission and/or (possible) draft regulation/Debate
8. EASA—Debate
9. (possible) Agreement with (CEECs)
Exchange of views/progress report
10. Agreement with Cyprus[1]—Adoption of negotiating mandate
11. Air traffic delays—Commission Communication
Commission presentation
12. Galileo—negotiations with US and Russia
Commission progress report
13A. Ferry Manning: economic impact of draft directive
Commission working paper—Commission presentation
13B. Transport and Environment (TERM)—Commission report on indicators
Commission presentation
13C. Innovation forum—Commission presentation
13D. Eurocontrol—Community accession
Commission progress report
13E. EU/US dialogue on aviation
Commission information on Chicago Conference
13F. Air transport and the environment—Commission Communication
Commission presentation

10–11 December—Helsinki—European Council

No formal agenda

13 December—Brussels—ECOFIN Council

No agenda yet available

13–14 December—Brussels—Environment Council

1 Adoption of the agenda
2. (possible) Approval of the "A" list items

3. Proposal for a Council Recommendation providing for minimum criteria for environmental inspections in the member states[1] (Legal basis proposed by the Commission: Art. 175(1))
   Common position
   5086/99 ENV 1 PRO-COOP 1
4. Proposal for a Council Directive amending Directive 88/609/EEC on the limitation of emissions of certain pollutants into the air from large combustion plants[1]
   (Legal basis proposed by the Commission: Art. 175(1))
   Common position
   10916/98 ENV 364 PRO-COOP 144
5. Amended proposal for a Council Directive on assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment[1]
   (Legal basis proposed by the Commission: Art. 175(1))
   Common position
   7093/97 ENV 104 PRO-COOP 32
   6333/99 ENV 59 PRO-COOP 40
6. Proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council relating to limit values for benzene and carbon monoxide in ambient air[1]
   (Legal basis proposed by the Commission: Art. 175(1))
   Common position
   5518/99 ENV 14 PRO-COOP 10
7. International negotiations concerning the Protocol on biosafety
   Council conclusions
8. Overall assessment of the Fifth Action Programme and environmental sectoral indicators
   Presentation by the Commission and exchange of views
9. Proposal for a Directive of the European parliament and of the Council on national emission ceilings for certain atmospheric pollutants, and Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and the Council relating to ozone in ambient air
   Progress report
   10232/99 ENV 262 CODEC 425
10. The Commission's work programme for 2000
    Briefing by the Commission
11. Community strategy on chemical products
    Progress report from the Commission
12. Other business
    (a) Brominated flame retardants
    request by the Danish and Swedish delegations
    (b) "Car-free day" event
    briefing by the French delegation
    (c) (possible) Situation of the SAVE and ALTENER programmes
    statement by the Spanish delegation

13–17 December—Strasbourg—European Parliament Plenary

No agenda yet available

14–15 December—Brussels—Agriculture Council

No agenda yet available

14–16 December—Brussels—Ministerial Conference on Follow-up of Progress on UN Beijing Platform for Action

No formal agenda

16–17 December—Brussels—Fisheries Council

1. Adoption of the Agenda
2. Approval of the list of "A" items
3. Proposal for a Council Regulation fixing for 2000 the fishing opportunities and associated conditions for certain fish stocks and groups of fish stocks, applicable in Community waters and, for Community vessels, in other waters where limitations in catch are required[1]
   Legal basis: Article 8(4) of Reg. (EEC) no. 3760/92
   Adoption
4. (possible) Morocco: future fisheries relations
   State of play by Commission
5. Proposal for a Council Regulation laying down certain control measures applicable in the area covered by the Convention on Future Multilateral Co-operation in the North-East Atlantic Fisheries[1]
   Legal basis: Article 37 of the Treaty
   Adoption
   Doc. 10074/99 PECHE 144
6. (possible) Proposal for a Council Regulation amending for the fifth time Regulation (EC) no. 850/98 for the conservation of fishery resources through technical measures for the protection of juveniles of marine organisms (sandeels)
7. Any other Business
   (possible) Regional meetings
   Presentation of the Communication by the Commission
   Organisation of future work

[1] Items on which a vote may be requested

European Calendar: December 1999-May 2000

This calendar is primarily concerned with European Union matters, but certain other relevant events are also included. Events and dates quoted are based on the information available on the date of issue.

Date	*Venue*	*Event*
December 1999		
29 November-3 December	Seattle	WTO Ministerial Conference
1–2	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
2	Brussels	Energy Council
2	Brussels	Research Council
2	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
6–7	Brussels	General Affairs Council
6–7	Brussels	Internal Market Council
7	Brussels	Accession Conferences with Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Slovenia
7	Brussels	Association Councils with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland
7–8	Brussels	3rd EU-ACP Ministerial Conference
9–10	Luxembourg	Transport Council
10–11	Helsinki	European Council
13	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
13–14	Brussels	Environment Council
13–17	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
14–15	Brussels	Agriculture Council
14–16	Brussels	Ministerial Conference on Follow-up of Progress on UN Beijing Platform for Action
16–17	Brussels	Fisheries Council

Date	Venue	Event
January 2000		
14	Brussels	Fisheries Council (possible)
17–21	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
18	Brussels	Budget Council (possible)
24–25	Brussels	General Affairs Council
24–25	Brussels	Agriculture Council
28–29	Lisbon	Development Ministers (Informal)
31	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
February 2000		
2–3	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
11–12	Lisbon	Social Affairs Council (Informal)
14–15	Brussels	General Affairs Council
14–18	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
21–22	Brussels	Agriculture Council
21–22	Vilamoura	San Jose Meeting
23–24	Vilamoura	Rio Group Meeting
28	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
March 2000		
1–2	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
3–4	Lisbon	Justice and Home Affairs Council (Informal)
13	Brussels	Joint Social Affairs and ECOFIN Council
13–17	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
16	Brussels	Internal Market Council
20–21	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20–21	Brussels	Agriculture Council
23–24	Lisbon	Special European Council
27	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
28	Brussels	Transport Council
29–30	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
30	Brussels	Environment Council
April 2000		
3	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council
3–4	Cairo	EU-Africa Summit
4	Luxembourg	Social Affairs Council
7–8	Lisbon	ECOFIN Council (Informal)
10–11	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
10–14	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
13	Luxembourg	Consumer Affairs Council
15–16	Oporto	Environment Council (Informal)
17–18	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
May 2000		
2	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
2	Brussels	Telecommunications Council
3–4	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
5–7	San Miguel, Azores	Informal Meeting of Foreign Ministers
11	Brussels	Health Council
15–16	Brussels	Agriculture Council
15–19	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
16	Brussels	Culture Council
18	Brussels	Industry Council
18	Brussels	Development Council
22–23	Brussels	General Affairs Council
25	Brussels	Internal Market Council
28–30	Evora	Agriculture Council (Informal)
29–30	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
30	Brussels	Energy Council

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 2 December 1999

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Target Setting

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many targets have been agreed between his Department and (i) local authorities and (ii) other bodies apart from his own agencies and non-departmental bodies since May 1997. [99475]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* The Department's Public Service Agreement (PSA) sets out the Department's own targets in respect of local government. Details of any targets agreed with local government are not held centrally, although the Secretary of State will specify performance indicators and targets covering the broad range of local government functions under the best value provisions set out in Part I of the Local Government Act 1999. These indicators and targets will be introduced by Order by the end of 1999, and will apply from April 2000.

Rail Services

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information has been provided for local residents on the proposed reduction in rail services between Nunhead and Victoria. [99586]

Mr. Prescott: The changes which will affect Victoria to Nunhead services from the start of the new year are currently shown in the timetable information available at stations, as these form part of the winter 1999–2000 timetable which came into effect on 26 September 1999. Since that timetable was agreed, Connex have reinstated the two trains per hour to Victoria, and will provide an hourly service from Victoria.

Road Deaths (Alcohol)

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* drivers, *(b)* riders, *(c)* passengers and *(d)* others have been killed in crashes where one or more driver or rider has exceeded the legal alcohol limit in each of the past five years, for (i) urban and (ii) rural areas; what the average figures were for 1981 to 1985; and if he will make a statement. [100041]

Mr. Hill: The numbers of fatalities in road accidents where one or more driver or rider was over the legal alcohol limit are not available for urban and rural areas; however, estimates can be made by the speed limit of the road on which the accident occurred. The estimates in the table, shown rounded to the nearest 10, are for built-up roads with a speed limit of 40 mph or less and for non-built-up roads with a speed limit of more than 40 mph, for the last five years for which figures are available.

Total estimates of drink drive fatalities

	1981–85[1]	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
(i) Built-up roads						
Motor vehicle drivers	170	90	90	80	110	100
Two-wheel motor vehicle riders	170	40	50	30	40	50
Motor vehicle passengers	140	60	50	70	80	60
Others	120	40	40	30	40	30
(ii) Non-built-up roads						
Motor vehicle drivers	350	190	190	200	220	190
Two-wheel motor vehicle riders	100	30	30	40	30	30
Motor vehicle passengers	170	90	70	90	70	80
Others	40	10	10	10	10	10

[1] Average

GM Crops

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will describe the nature of the unacceptable effects on the environment which he would consider sufficient to prevent commercial exploitation of GM crops. [99907]

Mr. Mullin: Before any release of a GMO can take place, the regulatory authority must ensure that all appropriate measures are taken to avoid any adverse effects on human health and the environment which might arise. Assessment of adverse effects is carried out on a case-by-case basis, looking at such things as gene transfer to wild relatives, toxicity of gene products, allergenicity, invasiveness and persistence of the plant as a weed, etc. The statutory Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) has been set up to advise ministers on these issues and has published the guidance note "The Regulation and Control of the Deliberate Release of Genetically Modified Organisms" on the risk assessment procedure.

In the case of the farm-scale evaluations of GM oil seed rape and fodder maize currently underway, ACRE has already advised on the risks to the environment of the GM plants themselves. In addition, the independent scientific steering committee will also be able to advise Government on the significance, and therefore the acceptability, of any impacts on farmland wildlife associated with the

management of the crops as compared with equivalent non-GM crops, such as a reduction in invertebrate or weed numbers.

In the light of the results and the advice from the committees, decisions will be made on the commercialisation of the GM crops.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research he is currently undertaking into the role that the cauliflower mosaic viral promoter may play in enhancing horizontal gene transfer. [100169]

Mr. Mullin: The statutory Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) has recently been asked to consider this issue and will be advising shortly. ACRE's advice will be published, and if the committee considers it necessary, appropriate scientific research will be commissioned.

Carn Brea Leisure Centre, Cornwall

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the proposed closure of Carn Brea Leisure Centre in Cornwall. [100231]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is for Kerrier District Council to explain its decision to close the sports hall and swimming pool at Carn Brea and to justify any alternative proposals in its Best Value Performance Plans, which must be completed by 31 March 2000. In the meantime, I would expect the Council to do everything it can to keep the facilities open.

Bio-diesel

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to encourage the production of bio-diesel to help the UK achieve its target of 20 per cent. reduction in greenhouse gases; and if he will make a statement. [100240]

Mr. Hill: Many alternative road fuels have the potential to offer significant environmental benefits, and the Government are keen to encourage their wider use wherever it is cost-effective to do so. Bio-diesel has the potential to offer reduced CO_2 emissions compared with ordinary diesel. We will continue to keep under review bio-diesel's potential for cost-effective reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from road transport.

Road Tolls

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the countries in which tolls have been imposed on road use on roads which had existed free of use, for at least five years prior to tolling. [99926]

Mr. Prescott *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* We are aware that charges have been applied to previously free roads in many parts of the world, for example in Singapore, Norway and the United States, and will shortly be introduced on roads in Rome and Melbourne. However, comprehensive information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mobile Phone Installations

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to produce guidance for planning authorities on the handling of public health concerns that arise from proposals to site mobile phone base stations in residential areas; [100264]

(2) what plans he has to amend planning guidance for telecommunications permitted development in order to allow planning authorities to apply a precautionary principle in sensitive areas until the full non-thermal health effects of mobile phone radiation have been established. [100267]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government are aware of public concern about mobile phone systems and health and have set up an independent expert group to advise on possible risks to public health. The group, chaired by Sir William Stewart FRS, FRSE, is currently holding open meetings around the UK to take views.

My Department issued for consultation the draft of a joint circular with the Department of Health on land use planning and electro-magnetic fields (EMFs). The draft circular provides advice to local planning authorities in deciding applications for development giving rise to EMFs, such as telecommunications base stations. The guidance will be finalised as soon as practicable.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received in the last six months regarding *(a)* the conduct of mobile phone companies, *(b)* their applications for new mast sites and *(c)* such applications by Orange PCS. [100266]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department has received correspondence concerning the amenity and health aspects of the siting of telecommunications masts proposed by the different mobile phone operators, including Orange plc.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of mobile phone masts erected in the United Kingdom in the last 24 months have been shared by licence holders. [100263]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Department's Circular 4/99, "Planning for Telecommunications", makes clear the Government's expectation that developers should provide the local planning authority (LPA) with clear evidence that they have fully considered the use of existing masts, buildings and other structures before seeking to erect any new mast. If this evidence is not considered satisfactory, the LPA may be justified in refusing approval of the mast's siting. The information on shared masts is not available in the form requested. However, the mobile operators have told us that one third of existing masts owned by them are shared.

Dial-a-Ride (West London)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what level of funding West London Dial-a-Ride has received from his Department in each of the last five years. [100192]

Mr. Hill: The Government provide grant funding to London Transport for London Dial-a-Ride services, but the distribution of the grant between the six regional Dial-a-Ride companies is a matter for London Transport. Government funding for Dial-a-Ride services in London over the last five years is as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1994–95	11.3
1995–96	10.4
1996–97	10.1
1997–98	10.6
1998–99	11.5

Uniform Business Rate

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list in respect of each local authority area in England and Wales the projected yield of the Uniform Business Rate in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 1999–2000. [100741]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested on Wales is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

For England, the information requested on the projected yield of the Uniform Business Rate is not yet available. However, I have today placed in the Library of the House a table which shows the projected contribution to the Business Rate Pool for each local authority in England for 1999–2000.

Regional Government

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has for introducing democratically elected regional chambers in England. [100520]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have said that, in time, we will introduce legislation to allow people, region by region, to decide whether they want directly elected regional government. We remain committed to this. Finding the right solution may take time, just as the arrangements for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London have taken time.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what involvement Regional Development Agencies will have in monitoring social exclusion in the regions. [100518]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government have developed a set of 9 core "State of the Region" indicators which the RDAs used to inform the development of their strategies. These include an indicator entitled "Percentage of the population with above average living conditions" which is based on the standardised mortality ratio. In their strategies, RDAs have also developed, or have given a commitment to develop, further indicators which address the specific features of their region. These will include indicators covering some key social issues.

Signals Passed at Danger

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many signals passed at danger were recorded for each train operating company since 1990. [100662]

Mr. Hill: The information is not available. Incidents of signals passed at danger (SPADs) have been reportable under statute only since April 1996. At present, SPAD incidents are reported by the seven regional Railtrack zones and are not broken down into train operating companies. The Health and Safety Executive's 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99 annual reports on railway safety contain details of SPADs listed by Railtrack zone. Copies are available in the House Libraries.

Rail Link, Solihull

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy on the construction of the rail link between the Land Rover plant in Solihull and the west coast main line; and if he will make a statement. [100521]

Mr. Hill: The Rover Group Ltd. applied on 18 November to the Secretary of State for an Order under the Transport and Works Act 1992 to authorise this rail link. The period by which objections or other representations should be lodged ends on 14 January 2000. The Secretary of State will then consider whether a public inquiry should be held into the proposal.

The application will be considered on its merits in the light of relevant policies. These include, on the one hand, our policy of encouraging the movement of freight by rail rather than road where appropriate and, on the other, the restrictive planning policies that apply to development in the Green Belt. These issues and any others raised by interested parties will be carefully considered by the Secretary of State in deciding whether or not to make the Order.

Trans-European Networks

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which countries are eligible for the increase in funds in Trans-European Networks, following the Cologne Summit; what is the amount of the increase in funds; if the UK share has been allocated; and if he will make a statement. [100995]

Mr. Hill: Regulation (EC) No 1655/99 of 19 July 1999, which amended the 1995 trans-European network (TEN) financing Regulation (2236/95), established a financial framework of euro 4,600 million (about £2,890 million at current exchange rates) for TENs in the fields of transport, telecommunications and energy for the period 2000–2006. The financial framework for the period 1995–1999 was 2,345 million ECU. Any member state, or body within a member state, is entitled to bid for TEN funds to support a project of common interest. The decision to grant aid to a project rests with the Commission, with assistance from a Committee of representatives of member states for each TEN sector. There is no provision for sharing out the budget between the member states.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of renegotiation of the Trans-European Networks. [100884]

Mr. Hill: The transport trans-European network (TEN) guidelines (Decision No. 1692/96/EC) required the Commission, before 1 July 1999, to submit a report to the European Parliament and the Council indicating whether the guidelines should be adapted. The production of that report has been delayed and its publication is not now anticipated before Easter 2000. The Commission has indicated that, should the report suggest that the guidelines do need to be adapted, it expects to come forward with formal proposals before the end of 2000.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will name the schemes which the Government will propose for Trans-European Network funding; and if he will make a statement. [100887]

Mr. Hill: Bids for funds from the 2000 transport trans-European network (TEN) budget must be with the Commission by 10 January 2000. Our officials have received a number of proposals and are currently considering which of these should be submitted to the Commission. Ministers will make a decision on the bids later this year. At this stage, it is possible to confirm only that we will submit bids for support for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and for the West Coast Main Line modernisation, as we indicated in our 1998 White Paper on the Future of Transport (Cm 3950).

Lindane

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the recommendation of the EU to ban lindane; and if he will publish the scientific evidence which he has received on lindane. [101067]

Mr. Mullin: The recommendation to suspend the use of lindane as an agricultural pesticide was contained in a report that the Austrian authorities, as rapporteur, submitted to the European Commission as part of the EU review of pesticides. The Commission has yet to reach a decision on the future European status of lindane.

A "review report", which includes the rapporteur's monograph, together with reports of the peer review meetings and a summary cover report, will be made available after a final decision has been taken.

Daylight Saving

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the effect of Daylight Saving on the numbers of road *(a)* injuries and *(b)* deaths of children in each year since 1990. [100116]

Mr. Hill: The Department commissioned research into the likely benefits of changing British Summertime to increase the safety benefits of daylight hours. The report by TRL published in 1998 looked essentially at potential casualty reductions if the clocks were set one hour forward in Winter (October to March) and two hours forward in Summer (March to October). This would in effect mean that throughout the year it would be lighter in the evenings and darker in the mornings.

The conclusion was that this might save over 100 deaths per year, and taken together with serious injuries save well over 400 casualties. There are no separate figures pertaining to children.

Eye-Tests (Drivers)

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what tests *(a)* train drivers and *(b)* drivers of public service vehicles are required to take to determine their ability to distinguish between colours; and how often they are required to take them. [101167]

Mr. Hill: Train drivers are required to pass a medical which includes a test for colour blindness, using the Ishihara Plates Test. Train drivers are also required to meet certain visual acuity requirements. The period between medical assessments is determined by the age of the train drivers; those aged less than 56 are medically assessed every five years, those aged 56 to 62 every two years, and train drivers over 62 every 12 months.

Drivers of passenger carrying vehicles (PCV's) are not tested specifically for colour blindness but do need to meet certain visual acuity requirements.

Local Authority Housing Finance

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what further consultations he proposes on the detail of his proposals to reform local authority housing finance. [101417]

Mr. Raynsford: Improving local authority financial accounting is an important part of our agenda to modernise local government. As part of our plan to introduce resource accounting to local authority housing finance, we intend to remove rent rebates from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). Today I have published a consultation paper asking for views on the details of how this could be done. Removing rent rebates from the HRA will make councils housing finances simpler and more transparent. It will be easier for local residents to see how money is being spent, increasing openness and accountability. Copies of the new consultation paper have been placed in the Library of the House. We published two other consultation papers earlier in the month on other aspects of improving local authority housing finance.

Nitrate-vulnerable Zones

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he is proposing further designations of nitrate vulnerable zones in England; and if he will make a statement. [101592]

Mr. Mullin: Following a reference to the European Court of Justice, the Government have now widened their interpretation of the EU Nitrates Directive, beyond monitoring nitrate levels in drinking water sources, to include monitoring in non-drinking water freshwaters. It is expected that this extended testing will lead to the

designation of new Nitrate-vulnerable Zones, in which Action Programme measures will help to reduce nitrate levels in water. Nitrate levels in non-drinking surface waters are already being monitored by the Environment Agency and parallel work will be undertaken to establish nitrate levels in groundwater not used as a source of drinking water.

Technical assessment of the extended monitoring as a result of this change is already under way, and completion of the associated mapping of areas proposed for designation is expected next year. The Government will then publish a consultation paper, detailing their designation proposals, which will set out the exact number and location of the new Nitrate-vulnerable Zones. It is expected that, as with existing Nitrate-vulnerable Zones, the majority of any new designations will be in central and eastern England.

River Thames (Safety)

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when Lord Justice Clarke's interim report on safety on the River Thames will be published. [101593]

Mr. Hill: Lord Justice Clarke's interim report has been published today (CM 4530). The report deals with safety on the River Thames and is the first product of the Thames Safety Inquiry, which the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 18 August this year. I am glad to receive this welcome and thorough report, which is helpful as we approach the Millennium celebrations. Lord Justice Clarke has asked for any comments on the report by 10 December, and I will be very interested to see all the reactions to his recommendations.

I will, of course, review the report in detail and have already asked the Department for an action plan to be submitted to Ministers before Christmas. I have the following immediate announcements:

As to Millennium Night celebrations on the river:

> I am grateful for the extensive planning already done to ensure safety on the River on Millennium night by the Port of London Authority (PLA), by the Government Office for London and by the emergency services. As Minister for London, I have been closely involved and fully concur with Lord Justice Clarke's conclusion that the emergency services are as prepared as they can reasonably be expected to be for the Millennium celebrations. This should reassure users of the river and its banks that they will be able to enjoy a spectacular evening in safety.
>
> In the past few months the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has inspected every passenger ship operating between the Thames Barrier and Teddington Lock to make sure they continue to operate safely. Each vessel now carries a specific Search and Rescue (SAR) plan agreed with PLA, and those plans will also be approved by MCA before the Millennium.

As to the important issue of alcohol controls:

> My Department has today issued a public consultation paper on the introduction of alcohol controls, considering options not only in relation to masters and crew of merchant shipping and fishing vessels, but also for those navigating other vessels (including privately owned pleasure craft). We will finalise our proposals next year in light of comments received.

As to the year 2000, when we expect peak use of the Thames:

> In the coming year, MCA will continue its enhanced programme of inspections of passenger ships on the Thames, to ensure continued operational safety.
>
> Riverbank authorities are urgently invited to review the provision of bankside life-saving equipment in light of Lord Justice Clarke's recommendation.
>
> We are studying urgently how we can improve search and rescue facilities on the river allowing for those already provided by the Port of London Authority, the River Police and the London Fire Brigade. We are considering, in collaboration with other relevant authorities, the provision on an experimental basis, of an inshore rescue craft service on the Thames. Any such provision would be reviewed later in 2000 to inform decisions on permanent provision on the river in the light of operational experience. I am glad to announce that the PLA would be willing to manage this experiment for the Department.
>
> The Department will also work closely with PLA to produce a formal assessment of the risks associated with navigation on the tidal Thames. This will include consideration of search and rescue arrangements, as recommended by Lord Justice Clarke. I have asked for the first results of this assessment to be sent to me personally as soon as possible so that it can influence further planning.

As to subsequent years:

> I am attracted by the recommendation that a duty should be imposed upon an appropriate single authority to assess and ensure the provision and coordination of search and rescue facilities on the Thames. I have asked for urgent advice on what legislation would be needed to secure its legal and financial basis. This will underpin the progress on safety which Lord Justice Clarke acknowledges has already been made and is now further enhanced by his recommendations.

I am grateful for Sir Anthony Clarke's practical proposals for the Thames safety regime. I now look forward to receiving his final report, which will contain his recommendation on whether there is a case for a further investigation or inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the Marchioness disaster.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Crime Fighting Fund

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to publish the bidding guidelines for forces to follow when bidding for a share of the Crime Fighting Fund for police recruits. [101472]

Mr. Straw: I have today placed a copy of the Bidding Guidelines, together with a copy of the form which forces and police authorities should use to apply for a share of the fund, in the Library.

Copies of the Guidelines and the form were sent to all Chief Constables and Chairmen of police authorities today. Those wishing to bid should complete the form and return it to the Home Office by 10 January 2000.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to make available the latest revisions of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate's country assessments. [101473]

Mrs. Roche: Revised country assessments were made available to caseworkers during September 1999. They will be made publicly available on the Home Office internet site

within the next few weeks and copies have been placed in the Library. The assessments are all sourced to information obtained from independent external sources and from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

A list of the countries for which assessments are prepared was previously set out in a reply from my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) on 13 May 1998, *Official Report*, columns 127–28W. They are revised at six-monthly intervals, previously in March and September. The schedule will change to April and October from 2000.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to what extent, under the proposed new arrangements for support of asylum seekers, it will be possible for voluntary or charitable bodies to supplement in cash or in kind the support provided from public funds without a corresponding reduction in that support. [99941]

Mrs. Roche: Under the new Asylum Support Arrangements, it is intended that the National Asylum Support Service may take into account support from voluntary and charitable organisations when assessing the amount of support it will provide. This will not apply to emergency assistance provided while an application for support is being considered. This proposal is included in a consultation document which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced in a reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) on 25 November 1999, *Official report*, column 176W. The closing date for comments on these proposals is 14 January 2000 and we shall finalise our policy after that date.

DEFENCE

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the cost of fees incurred by the Air, Army and Sea Cadets in using the Criminal Records Bureau will be met by his Department; and if he will he make a statement. [100610]

Mr. Spellar: The Cadet Forces will be required to pay for their use of the Criminal Records Bureau. I understand that the fee is likely to be around £10 per inquiry. We would expect such costs to be met from within existing resources.

Falklands

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions RAF flights serving the Falkland Islands have been delayed by mechanical or other failures since September; and if he will make a statement. [100899]

Mr. Spellar: Since September, there have been 42 flights to and from the Falkland Islands (21 outbound and 21 return). Of these, eight flights were delayed for aircraft serviceability or availability reasons.

Army (Retention)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make available to the public *(a)* Major-General Spacie's report, "Welfare in the Army", *(b)* the Army's Retention Study and *(c)* the Continuous Attitude Surveys for service leavers produced by DASA; and if he will make a statement. [100219]

Mr. Spellar: The purpose of all three reports is to inform the Army's personnel management policies and there are currently no plans to publish the findings externally. Major-General (Retired) Spacie's report, "Welfare in the Army" and the Army's Retention Study were commissioned to study Welfare provision and personnel policies across the Army. The Continuous Attitude Survey aims to determine the attitude of serving personnel, their families and Service leavers; this highlights trends which are useful in the development of sound personnel and training policies.

East Timor

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on force levels in East Timor. [101476]

Mr. Hoon: There are now over 10,000 troops in the international force in East Timor (INTERFET) and the Australian Force Commander has agreed that circumstances now enable the withdrawal of British forces.

The UK currently has some 290 service personnel in East Timor. Lead elements of the contingent from 2nd Battalion Royal Gurkha Rifles will return to their base in Brunei on 8 December. The remainder of the troops, including UK-based headquarters staff and signallers, and an RAF C-130 aircraft deployed to the region, will be withdrawn by 15 December.

Although the UK does not plan to contribute units to the follow-on UN peacekeeping force (UNTAET), a small number of military observers will be provided. The Government have also offered Australia assistance with airlift for a short period during the transition from INTERFET to UNTAET.

The deployment of the Gurkhas, RAF C-130 aircraft, and earlier of HMS Glasgow, is another example of the UK's ability to provide forces capable of decisive action in the difficult initial stages of a crisis. British troops were able to lend their considerable expertise and experience to the international force. This has assisted the swift return of over 100,000 refugees.

Army Personnel (Compensation)

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made on the review of compensation arrangements for members of the armed forces. [101477]

Mr. Spellar: I am considering draft proposals from the review of compensation arrangements and hope to publish a consultation document early next year. The review represents the first comprehensive look at compensation arrangements since the War Pensions Scheme was introduced over fifty years ago. It is a highly complex subject. The review has examined from first principles the way in which service men and women and their

dependants are compensated when they suffer illness, injury or death due to service. I am determined that we should provide our service men and women with a compensation package which will give them the reassurance that they will be provided for when facing the challenges and risks associated with service life.

Kosovo

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many shelter kits have been sent to Kosovo for relief aid; and what is the cost of the kits. [100750]

Mr. Foulkes: I have been asked to reply.

Over 100,000 houses in Kosovo suffered damage in the conflict, of which half are beyond repair. This situation affects over 700,000 people. Emergency shelter is co-ordinated by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 57,100 emergency repair kits are being provided through United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and Office For Disaster Assistance / USAID, in order to create dry shelter in repairable houses, on the basis of one room per family. According to the latest available figures, over 60 per cent. had been distributed by 15 November. UNHCR and OFDA/USAID are also distributing some 10,000 extended roofing kits which aim to provide shelter for several families within a single less-damaged dwelling.

ECHO have committed 16.5 million euros for NGO programmes focusing on shelter. The EC Task Force have separately committed 14 million euros. OFDA spend $33.4 million on shelter in the last US fiscal year (ending September 1999), and have so far spent $12 million this fiscal year. Figures for UNHCR are not currently available.

The Department for International Development's (DFID) chief contributions to winterisation complement shelter initiatives. Through DFID's Emergency Infrastructure Engineering Unit we aim to get essential work done on utilities, particularly power and water supply, before the winter becomes too severe. We have committed £19 million for these works. Pristina airport is crucial to emergency rehabilitation as an alternative supply route to the congested Blace crossing. DFID has committed up to £3 million to carry out emergency works to keep it open for 24-hour civilian air operations through the winter.

Goats (Experimentation)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many goats have been killed as a result of experiments conducted on them in the last six months by the MoD. [100748]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 2 December 1999:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the number of goats killed as a result of experiments in the last six months by the Ministry of Defence.

As I explained in my letter of 14 April 1999 the total number of goats killed in 1999 will be higher than in recent years. In addition to the on-going submarine escape programme carried out on behalf of the Ministry of Defence, DERA is also taking part in a 3 year co-operative programme with the United States Navy looking at safe rescue from submarines. The conditions of this co-operative research will result in a higher number of animals humanely killed for the 3 years of the programme's duration. In addition, a restocking programme has taken place as many of the goats were getting old and, on veterinary advice, these have also been humanely killed.

In view of these factors, it may be misleading to provide figures for the last six months and I will, therefore, address the period from 1 January 1999. From 1 January to 29 November 1999, 62 goats were humanely killed following experiments, 36 were humanely killed for reasons of old age and another 4 on grounds of ill health.

The Animal (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 assumes that all experiments cause stress to the animals involved and it is therefore normal practice to humanely kill the animals at the end of the experiment. Only where the experiment is considered sufficiently benign for the animals not to suffer any long lasting stress do the terms of the Act, subject to Home Office review, allow them to be used on more than one occasion. This is usually the case with the goats used in the submarine research programme.

I hope this is helpful.

RAF Ash

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has for the future of RAF Ash. [100291]

Mr. Kilfoyle: None. RAF Ash was sold on 24 July 1998.

Recruitment (Fiji)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel went as part of the British Army recruiting team to Fiji. [100756]

Mr. Spellar: A total of 26 personnel, military and civilian, have been involved in the Army selection visit to Fiji. One military officer visited prior to deployment to brief the Fijian Prime Minister. The team that subsequently deployed consisted of 25 personnel. Of these, two have already returned to the UK. The purpose of the visit was not recruitment, but to process applications to the British Army already received.

Himalayan Kayak Expedition

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British soldiers are participating in the British Army Himalayan Kayak Expedition. [100749]

Mr. Spellar: Adventurous Training Exercise Himalayan Encounter Finn was a tri-Service kayaking expedition conducted in Nepal by 42 British Service personnel between 23 September and 6 November 1999. Thirty-three of the participants were Army personnel.

Recruitment (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what targets he has for the recruitment of ethnic minorities into Her Majesty's forces. [100570]

Mr. Spellar: The recruiting goal for this financial year is for 3 per cent. of all new recruits to be drawn from ethnic minorities. The goal, first set in 1998–99 at 2 per cent., rises annually by 1 per cent. to a goal of 5 per cent. by 2001–02.

Land Disposals

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what was the value of surplus land disposals for the Army for each of the last three years; [100883]

(2) what is the value of surplus land disposals by the Royal Navy in each of the last three years; [100747]

(3) what was the value of surplus land disposals for the Royal Air Force in each of the last three years. [101196]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The information requested is not held centrally. However, I will write to the hon. Member once it is available and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Campaign Medals

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will assess the benefits of issuing a campaign medal to service personnel who served in the Suez Canal Zone between 1951 and 1954. [100335]

Mr. Kilfoyle: My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, when Under-Secretary of State for Defence, reviewed the matter of a medal for those who served in the Canal Zone between 1951 and 1954 last year. He concluded that he could find no grounds for reopening the case to award a medal for service in the Canal Zone between 1951 and 1954. He saw no new evidence that he believed would enable him to persuade the Committee on the Grant of Honours Decorations and Medals to overturn their policy of non-retrospection, or revoke any of the decisions made at the time or following the various reviews since 1990.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much his Department has spent on ministerial transport in each of the last two years. [98709]

Mr. Byers: Ministers in the Department of Trade and Industry are required—under the terms of the Ministerial Code and Travel by Ministers—to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. For Information on spend on the Government Car Service, I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 1 December 1999, *Official Report,* columns 255–56W.

Post Office

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the post offices that have opened in England and Wales in the last 12 months. [99606]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that 9 new post offices have opened in England and Wales and a further 136 offices have reopened since October 1998. I have arranged for a list of these offices, prepared by the Post Office, to be placed in the Library of the House. The Post Office definition of a reopened post office includes offices which have relocated and those to which a new subpostmaster/subpostmistress has been appointed, as well as offices which reopen after a period of closure.

Cannabis

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what initiatives his Department is undertaking to test the medicinal benefits of cannabis. [99646]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 25 November 1999]:* The Medical Research Council (MRC) has invited a number of research proposals on the potential therapeutic uses of cannabinoids. A funding decision is expected in December on a clinical trial concerning the therapeutic uses of cannabinoids/cannabis in the treatment of spasticity in multiple sclerosis. Two further trials of its use in post-operative pain will be considered next year.

The MRC currently co-funds a "Realising Our Potential Awards" (ROPA) grant with Zeneca at the University of Manchester. This study investigates the effects of cannabinoids on brain cell degeneration. MRC have contributed £97,260.

Also, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) supports two individual projects/grants investigating the medicinal effects of cannabis.

Mobile Phone Installations

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the number of new mobile phone masts to be erected in the United Kingdom in each of the next three years. [100265]

Ms Hewitt: No estimate has been made, and I do not have the commercial information available to enable me to make one. However, it is Government policy to limit the number of masts where possible through mast sharing. The Telecommunications Act 1984 licences of the mobile network operators therefore require that before they erect a new mast they investigate the possibility of using an existing mast belonging to themselves or another licensee; of replacing an existing mast belonging to themselves or another licensee with a mast for joint use; and of erecting, in co-operation with any other telecommunications operator, a mast for their joint use. This is reinforced by the Government's planning policy, which is to encourage mast and site sharing where appropriate.

Refrigeration

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the regulations with which a company manufacturing refrigerators and employing 1,500 people has to comply. [100482]

Ms Hewitt: The following regulations apply specifically to a refrigerator manufacturer, employing 1,500 people:

The Energy Information (Refrigerators and Freezers) Regulation SI 3076, 1994

The Energy Efficiency (Refrigerators and Freezers) Regulation SI 1941, 1997

Environmental Protection (Control of Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer) SI 506, 1996.

In addition, a refrigerator manufacturer will need to meet other regulations including those deriving from company law, taxation, employment, health and safety, land planning requirements and environmental legislation.

Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the potential IT benefits from fundamental research at CCLRC; and what steps he is taking to mobilise UK enterprise to maximise the opportunities. [100241]

Ms Hewitt: IT is intrinsic to CCLRC's research activities, not just those of the computer science and engineering and IT departments. Its benefits are continuously assessed by the other Research Councils, which are its primary customers.

CCLRC is actively involved in programmes to disseminate knowledge and technology to the wider business community. These include regional initiatives to provide access for SMEs to the skills base, and participation in a programme on behalf of the EU to involve industry in future developments of the worldwide web.

It is also active in encouraging development of start-up companies on CCLRC sites, where the business development offices at Daresbury and Rutherford encourage technology transfer and act as 'incubators' in the initial growth phase. A particular success story is that of Bookham Technology Ltd., founded in 1989, and located at Rutherford Appleton Laboratory from 1992–97.

The company designs and manufactures silicon integrated optical devices for the next generation of fibre-optic cable. It has raised $90 million of investment to date from such firms as Intel, Cisco, and 3I, and now employs 210 staff on sites in the UK, USA, and Japan.

Business Rates

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the impact upon the competitiveness of businesses in England and Wales of the increase in business rates for 2000–01. [100742]

Ms Hewitt: The purpose of the revaluation of non-domestic properties on 1 April 2000 is solely to update rateable values in line with changes in the property market since the previous revaluation in 1995 and to ensure they accurately reflect the relative rental value of properties. Although the total rateable value for England will increase—reflecting the improved state of the economy since the 1995 revaluation—the National Rate Multiplier will be reduced for the first time since it was introduced in 1990. Overall, the total amount collected in rates will be broadly the same in real terms as in 1999–2000.

A consultation exercise was undertaken on the need to introduce transitional arrangements to mitigate the impact of the 2000 revaluation of the rates bills of individual businesses. In their responses to the consultation paper—which included a draft Regulatory Impact Assessment—the vast majority of businesses supported the need, under the present arrangements, for a transitional relief scheme. The scheme announced on 25 November will place tight limits on the amounts that individual bills can rise as a result of the revaluation.

Textile Industry

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to meet representatives of the textile sector to discuss job losses in the industry. [101058]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I met the Textiles and Clothing Strategy Group, which includes representatives of textiles and clothing manufacturers, trade associations, unions, retailers and academia, to discuss issues affecting the industry on 13 October. Other DTI ministers are planning to meet representatives of the industry to discuss these issues further before Christmas

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received from the *(a)* Knitting Industry Federation and *(b)* National Union of Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trades about the textile industry; and if he will make a statement. [101057]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Department has received a number of representations about the textiles industry, including representations from the National Union of Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trades.

I appreciate the widespread concern in the industry about the number and rate of job losses in the sector and I am keeping a close eye on developments. In particular, I am looking forward to seeing the report from the industry-led Textiles and Clothing Strategy Group, which will contain recommendations for action to address a number of the issues currently affecting the industry.

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what *(a)* capital and *(b)* revenue financial assistance he has given to the textile sector in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000. [101059]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government offer support for capital investment under the Regional Selective Assistance (RSA) scheme. RSA offered to the textiles and clothing industry in Great Britain in recent years was as follows:

Year	£
1996–97	12,505,000
1997–98	5,863,000
1998–99	4,175,000

In addition to capital support, the textiles and clothing industries have benefited from a wide range of government assistance in areas such as trade promotion, training, research and technical development, supply chain development, spreading best practice and support for design.

Post Office

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the extent to which first class mail is delivered the next day by the Post Office. [100927]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The latest statistics published by the Post Office show that nationally, for the July-September quarter 1999, 92.1 per cent. of first class mail was delivered on the next working day following posting against a target of 92.5 per cent.

Arms Exports (Channel Islands)

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what end-user undertakings were given with regard to arms exports to the Channel Islands between 1 January and 31 December 1998 regarding the

permanent OIELs issued under summary classifications 14 and 333 and the SIELs issued under classifications ML1, ML2, ML3 and ML4; and if he will make a statement. [100112]

Dr. Howells: In almost all circumstances, applications for a Standard Individual Export Licence (SIEL) must be supported by an appropriate end-user undertaking. Where the intended consignee is a Government body, and the application is not for a licence to export chemicals listed in Schedule 2 or 3 to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to a state which has not ratified the CWC, a copy of the official purchase order or a copy of the relevant part of the contract covering the order is normally sufficient.

An Open Individual Export Licence (OIEL) is specific to an individual exporter and covers multiple shipments of specified goods to specified destinations and/or, in some cases, specified consignees. The exporter must obtain from each consignee an appropriate end-user undertaking for each export before the export takes place, or not later than one month after the date of exportation.

Under arrangements between the DTI's Export Control Organisation (ECO) and Jersey and Guernsey Customs and Excise Departments, the latter send ECO all applications for a licence to export arms or other goods controlled for strategic reasons from the Channel Islands. ECO then circulates these applications to OGDs for advice in line with their policy requirements as determined by them, before giving advice to the relevant Channel Islands licensing authority. Copies of licences issued for the export of such goods to the Channel Islands are sent to the Channel Islands authorities.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on arms exports to the Channel Islands, with specific reference to Clauses 5(a), 11(a) and 11(d) of the criteria used in considering conventional arms export licence applications. [100114]

Dr. Howells: All applications for a licence to export to the Channel Islands any goods subject to control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended (commonly known as the Military List), are considered against the criteria announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 28 July 1997, *Official Report,* columns 26–29, and the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. Copies of licences issued for the export of such goods to the Channel Islands are sent to the Channel Islands authorities.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on how many occasions since 1 May 1997 the export licensing authorities of the Channel Islands have consulted his Department with regard to the re-export of arms originally exported to the Channel Islands under licence from his Department; what the outcome was of these consultations; and if he will make a statement. [100115]

Dr. Howells: Under arrangements between the DTI's Export Control Organisation (ECO) and Jersey and Guernsey Customs and Excise Departments, the latter send ECO all applications for a licence to export arms or other goods controlled for strategic reasons from the Channel Islands. ECO then circulates these applications to OGDs for advice in line with their policy requirements as determined by them, before giving advice to the relevant Channel Islands licensing authority. Copies of all licences issued for the export of such goods to the Channel Islands are sent to the Channel Islands authorities.

While ECO do not maintain a central record of the number of times that the Channel Islands authorities have requested advice, I understand that all decisions taken by the latter have been in line with the advice they have been given, whether or not the goods concerned were originally exported to the Channel Islands from the UK.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Milk Tokens

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent representations he has received on the provision of milk tokens to *(a)* pregnant students and *(b)* all women on a low income. [100037]

Mr. Bayley: We have received no recent representations on these matters.

Carer's Premium

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would be the cost of allowing pensioners who become carers to receive the carer's premium in income support; how many new claimants he estimates would become eligible each year; and how long their entitlement would last on average. [100042]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows:

It is estimated that the extension of carer premium entitlement to those becoming carers aged 65 or over would cost £15 million in Income Support in the year 2000–01, with 20,000 gainers, together with a much smaller sum of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Information to estimate how long entitlement would last is not available.

Notes:

1. Cash prices. Costs rounded to the nearest £5 million, gainers rounded to the nearest five thousand.

2. As survey based estimates, the above will be subject to sampling error. The accuracy of the costing is also affected by the limitations of the data available on the time spent caring for a sick or disabled person.

3. The answer depends on their being underlying or actual entitlement to Invalid Care Allowance (ICA). It is assumed that all other ICA entitlement rules remain in place after the proposed change—including 35 hours spent caring, benefit overlap rules, earnings limits and receipt by the person being cared for of Disability Living Allowance (care) at the middle or higher rate or Attendance Allowance.

Source:

Family Resources Survey 1997–98.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people receive the carer's premium in income support; how many of these are pensioners; and at what ages these pensioners first became entitled to the benefit. [99920]

Mr. Bayley: As at August 1999 there were 193,000 Income Support claimants with a carer premium, of which 11,000 were aged 65 or over. The table provides

information on the age of the claimant when they first became entitled to Income Support. They may have been in receipt of the carer premium then or subsequently.

Income Support claimants aged 65 and over with the carer premium by age at the start of their current claim to Income Support, August 1999

Age of claimants	*Number of claimants*
All claimants	11,000
Aged under 59	3,000
60 to 64	5,000
65 and over	3,000

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample of Income Support claimants as such are subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Caseload figures are rounded to the nearest thousand and may not sum to totals.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, August 1999.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what has been the estimated loss to his Department as a result of benefit fraud during the last 12 months. [100440]

Mr. Rooker: Previous estimates have shown that £2 billion a year has definitely been lost through fraud. A further £3 billion may have been lost in cases where fraud is strongly suspected and a further £2 billion where there is some suspicion of fraud.

We are now measuring the level of fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance, the two most vulnerable benefits, thoroughly investigating a monthly random sample of cases in each Benefits Agency area. Staff error is measured separately by a special team within the Benefits Agency. The latest period for which figures are available is the 12 months ending September 1998 where the level of fraud and error in these benefits was £1.4 billion or 9 per cent. of the total benefit paid.

Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in Scotland are in receipt of industrial injuries benefit. [100256]

Mr. Bayley: The number of assessments for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit in payment for Scotland was 27,000 on 4 April 1998, the latest date for which statistics are available.

Note:

Figures for assessments are "provisional" and are based on a 10 per cent. sample of Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit, including an adjustment for late returns.

Source:

DSS (Analytical Services Division).

Departmental Performance Targets

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the targets and performance indicators for his Department's policies. [100916]

Mr. Rooker: The Department has set out the key performance targets on which it will be judged in its PSA, and the measures of success it will use in the Output and Performance Analysis (OPA) published in March this year.

In addition, the Secretary of State sets annual targets for the Department's agencies. These targets are announced to Parliament by means of a written parliamentary answer. A full list of the targets and target dates for the Department's agencies can be found in the Next Steps Report and in individual agency Business Plans. Performance against targets is also reported in agencies' Annual Reports. Copies of these documents can be found in the Library.

These high level targets are supported at operational level by numerous other internal targets in order to ensure delivery by individual units.

NIRS2

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the implications of NIRS2 problems for the implementation of stakeholder pensions in April 2001. [100646]

Mr. Rooker: IT support is one of a number of key issues we are addressing in the development of our implementation plans for stakeholder pensions. We are ensuring those plans take account of the difficulties so far experienced with NIRS2.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to have eliminated all remaining delays in payment of retirement pensions resulting from the transfer to the NIRS2 computer system; and if he will estimate *(a)* the total number of such payments still outstanding, *(b)* the total amount still outstanding, *(c)* the total number of pensioners who have been affected since the problem first occurred and *(d)* the likely total cost of compensation. [101141]

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many recipients of SERPS are receiving payments which have been estimated rather than calculated precisely because of NIRS2 problems; [100648]

(2) what provisions the Government have made to ensure that pensioners are not living in undue hardship because of the NIRS2 computer problems and benefit payment backlog; [100650]

(3) how much the Government have so far paid in compensation for NIRS2 delays; how much they expect to pay in future; and on what basis compensation is calculated; [100645]

(4) how many pensioners are suffering unreasonable delays in receiving contributory benefits as a result of the NIRS2 problems; [100649]

(5) how much money the Government still owes pensioners affected by the problems with NIRS2 in *(a)* unpaid benefits and *(b)* compensation. [100647]

Mr. Rooker: We have long-standing contingency arrangements to ensure that pensioners do not suffer undue hardship in the event that computer problems arise. Where NIRS2 cannot provide the information required to finalise a claim, clerical calculations are undertaken. Additional resources have been made available for

processing the clerical calculations, of both additional pension and the increase earned by people who have deferred receipt of their pension beyond minimum State Pension age.

A National Insurance benefit task force was set up to assist people who experience difficulties or who have queries about the problems arising from NIRS2.

As at 31 October 1999 we have paid £2.113 million in compensation for NIRS2 delays to benefit recipients. Of this £1.986 million relates to the flat-rate £10 compensation payments and £0.127 million to payments made under the normal rules of the Department's Special Payments Scheme. It is not possible at this time to estimate how much more compensation will be paid because of NIRS2 delays.

The Department operates a long-standing non-statutory compensation scheme, the terms of which have been agreed by the Parliamentary Ombudsman and his predecessors. Under the terms of the scheme compensation is calculated using the "Retail Shares and Deposit Average Rate" provided by the Building Societies Commission. Compensation may be provided for any period of delay beyond normal processing time (referred to as the "indicator of delay") for the benefit concerned. The rate currently in use is 3.872 per cent. Where a person would be due more than £10 under the terms of that scheme he or she is paid the balance in addition to the £10 outlined above.

As at 1 November 1999 the Inland Revenue estimate the cost of additional payments to Pension Providers, in respect of individual scheme members, for the delay in the payment of Age Related Rebates, was £36.2 million.

Up to the time that NIRS2 began providing Retirement Pension calculations on 6 January 1999, it was estimated that 285,000 pensioners had been affected by NIRS2 problems. Of these there remain about 40,000 cases to be reviewed. Not all of these will be in receipt of an incorrect amount of benefit.

Since 6 January NIRS2 has not been able to provide the amount of additional pension (SERPS) in about 10 per cent. of the cases in which it is known SERPS entitlement exists. For these estimated 60,000 claims a year the Benefits Agency is carrying out clerical calculations, with a view to ensuring that all new pensioners are receiving their full entitlement by the date of their retirement. In total, therefore, the maximum estimated number of new pensioners affected by NIRS2 problems to the end of 1999 will be 345,000.

Information about the full amount of Retirement Pension which has been underpaid because of the delayed implementation of the NIRS2 computer, and the compensation payable, will not be available until recovery action is complete. This is expected to be during next year.

Benefit Payment (Methods)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the advice given to pension and benefit recipients about whether they can choose to collect their payments in their local post office. [101069]

Mr. Rooker: All pension and benefit recipients receive advice on all the available methods of payments including collecting their payments in their local post office.

Free School Meals

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the estimated value of the notional amount included in family credit to compensate for non-entitlement to free school meals. [101144]

Mr. Bayley: When the Family Credit scheme was introduced in 1988, provision was made to replace the value of entitlement to free school meals (and free milk/vitamins for the under-fives). This was done by adding £2.55 a week to each child credit. The total child credit has since been uprated annually by the Rossi index.

Working Families' Tax Credit was introduced from 5 October 1999. It is more generous than the Family Credit it replaces.

Pensioners

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners aged over 75 years live with adults of below pension age; and what proportion that is of all pensioners aged over 75 years. [99397]

Janet Anderson: I have been asked to reply.

An estimated 0.4 million pensioners aged 75 or over live with adults below state pension age. This represents approximately 12 per cent. of all pensioners aged 75 years or over.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Kenya

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what financial aid was given by her Department to Kenya in the last year for which figures are available, indicating the projects for which aid was given. [99585]

Clare Short: UK aid to Kenya in 1998–99 totalled approximately £29 million, including £23.7 million from Technical Co-operation funds, £1.3 million Financial Aid, and £4 million Emergency Aid.

Projects over £1 million funded from Technical Co-operation and Emergency allocations and their expenditure in 1998–99 were as follows:

£000

Project	*Expenditure*
Kenya Agricultural Research Institute	2,274
Association for Better Land Husbandry	744
Smallholder Dairy Project	258
FarmAfrica Goat and Animal Health Project	121
Kwale Rural Support Programme	160
Wajir Pastoral Development Programme	125
ActionAid Capacity-building Programme	95
Wedco Microfinance, western Kenya	743
Kenya Women Finance Trust	214
Business Deregulation Project	287
Faulu Microfinance Project	885
Civil Society Umbrella Project (civil and political rights)	236
Support to 1999 Population Census	400
Primary Schools Management Project	1,118

£000

Project	Expenditure
Strengthening of Primary Education	1,486
Family Health Project	1,802
HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Project	2,047
Family Planning Interim Support Project	162
Emergency Provision of Malaria Drugs	799
Social Marketing of Condoms	975
Oxfam Floods Emergency Project	1,608
Eradication of Polio	2,879
Bomb Blast	
Re-equipping Kenya National Examinations Council	967
Re-equipping Co-operative Bank	994

Financial Aid in 1998–99 consisted of:

£000

Project	Expenditure
Molo-Litein Road Improvement	589
Pensions[1]	726

[1] Financial aid allocations include expenditure on the pre-independence element of pensions of former colonial public service officers.

British Council

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what amounts were paid by her Department to the British Council in respect of work carried out overseas in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99; and what is the estimated figure for the current financial period. [100054]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development's payments to the British Council in respect of work carried out overseas from 1997 to the current financial period are as follows:

	£ million
1997–98	44.8
1998–99	40.4
1999–2000	[1]32.8

[1] The figure for the financial year 1999–2000 is the current total to date

Contracts

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance is given by her Department to British companies to win contracts from Governments in receipt of aid from her Department. [100050]

Clare Short: None. The Department for International Development is responsible for promoting development and the reduction of poverty. British companies are assisted by British Trade International to win business overseas.

Complementary Medicine

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her support *(a)* for traditional medicine in treatment and management of HIV/AIDS and malaria in developing countries and *(b)* for the work of the Commonwealth Working Group on traditional and complementary health systems. [100726]

Mr. Foulkes: We will look with interest at any conclusions which bear upon improving the health of poor people in developing countries. The Working Group promises a comprehensive review of the contribution which traditional and complementary medicine can make towards better health.

Abortion

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact on the provision of *(a)* DFID and *(b)* joint DFID/US funded overseas family planning projects of the US Administration's decision to prohibit funding of foreign non-Governmental organisations which take part in public discussions on abortion in their own countries. [100476]

Mr. Foulkes: The US Administration's decision makes no difference to the commitment of this Government to helping poor people access good quality family planning and reproductive health services. It will not have a significant impact on jointly funded programmes.

HEALTH

Nursing and Residential Homes

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the financial impact that *(a)* the national minimum wage, *(b)* the working time directive and *(c)* the increase in registration fees will have on nursing and residential homes. [99050]

Mr. Hutton: The Low Pay Commission has been asked to monitor and evaluate the introduction and impact of the national minimum wage. The Commission has undertaken a consultation and fact-finding exercise during which it paid particular attention to the effect on low-paying sectors, including social care. The Government are due to receive the Commission's report in December and will then carefully consider its findings.

A regulatory impact appraisal on the costs and benefits for business generally resulting from the implementation of the Working Times Regulations was made, copies of which are available in the Library.

We will carefully consider the financial impact of increases in regulatory fees on residential and nursing homes before implementing any increase.

Epilepsy

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the prevalence of epilepsy is in each health authority area. [99839]

Mr. Hutton: The information is not available in the format requested.

Epilepsy is the most common chronic neurological disorder, affecting between 400,000 and 420,000 people—one in 200 of the United Kingdom population, including 100,000 children.

Free Prescriptions

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the basis for his policy for free prescriptions for those, not otherwise exempt, with certain medical conditions. [100014]

Ms Stuart: Entitlement to free prescription for those not otherwise exempt is based on the principle that those who can afford to contribute should do so, while those who are likely to have difficulty in paying should be protected.

The extensive exemption and charge remission arrangements are intended to ensure that no-one need be deterred from obtaining any necessary medication on financial grounds.

NHS Dentistry (Stoke-on-Trent)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which dental practices in Stoke-on-Trent, North are currently accepting new NHS patients. [100182]

Mr. Hutton: We understand that two dental practices in Stoke-on-Trent, North are currently accepting new National Health Service patients and another practice in the area will also be accepting new NHS patients from January following the appointment of a vocational trainee.

In addition, a practice in Stoke-on-Trent, North has had Investing In Dentistry moneys approved and it is anticipated that an additional surgery and the acceptance of new NHS patients will commence in the near future.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the waiting time between registration of new NHS patients and earliest appointment in Stoke-on-Trent, North; and if he will make a statement. [100183]

Mr. Denham: Specific data on waiting times between registration with a National Health Service dentist and earliest appointment in Stoke-on-Trent, North are not collected centrally. However, North Staffordshire Health Authority report that in Stoke-on-Trent, North new patients registering with an NHS dentist requiring urgent treatment will be seen within a week, while new dental patients requiring an extensive examination will be required to wait for a period of four to six weeks on average.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he will take to ensure emergency NHS dental services are available in Stoke-on-Trent, North. [100184]

Mr. Hutton: Emergency National Health Service dental services are provided as part of the General Dental Service contract to all patients registered with a NHS dental practitioner. North Staffordshire dentists operate an out-of-hours emergency rota which provides advice and care as appropriate to registered and unregistered individuals.

There is a salaried dental service located at Basford House, Stoke-on-Trent which provides access to dental care Monday to Friday for those unable to access general dental services. In addition, an emergency dental clinic also operates at Basford House every Saturday and Sunday, including Bank Holidays.

Optometrists

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) for what reason optometrists do not have a place as of right on the boards of primary care groups in England; [100492]

(2) what discussions he has held with the First Minister of the Welsh Assembly on the *(a)* contribution and *(b)* role of optometrists on the boards of local health groups in Wales; [100491]

(3) what plans he has to review his policy on whether optometrists should have a place as of right on the boards of primary care groups in England. [100493]

Mr. Hutton: The differing professional representation on primary care groups and local health groups reflects the differing roles of and expectations which we and the Welsh Assembly have of the two organisations. We feel that, in England, primary care groups can achieve high quality eye care by consulting both local optical committees and individual optometrists as appropriate. We will, however, be watching developments in Wales with interest to see what lessons can be learned.

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review his policy on whether an optometric adviser should be appointed to each health authority in line with those persons already appointed to advise on general practice, dentistry and pharmacy. [100494]

Mr. Denham: This is for individual health authorities to decide, but we will be pointing out to them the highly worthwhile contribution which optometric advisers can make to both the development of primary eye care and the probity of general ophthalmic services.

Primary Care

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many Primary Care Act pilots (1) were planned by the previous Government; and how many have been developed; [100196]

(2) have been planned by the present Government; and how many have *(a)* been developed and *(b)* are in the process of being developed. [100197]

Mr. Denham: No Primary Care Act pilots were initiated by the previous Government.

Personal Medical Services pilots

Since 1998 there have been two waves of applications. In the first wave, 134 expressions of interest were received; 118 applications were received subsequently, and 102 approvals were issued. 88 schemes went live on 1 April 1998, with 83 pilots still operating at 1 September 1999.

In the second wave, announced in October 1998, over 400 expressions of interest were received. This resulted in 315 proposals being submitted by the end of June 1999. Of those, 204 were approved, with 116 going live in October 1999 and a further 86 by April 2000.

Personal Dental Services pilots

Since 1998 there have been three waves of applications. There were 15 pilots in the first wave, 13 of which started in October 1998 with a further two starting in January 1999. In the second wave, 72 expressions of interest were received, and the roll-out of 23 pilots commenced in October 1999. 120 expressions of interest were received

for the third wave. These are currently being considered. Pilots in the third wave will commence from October 2000.

Down's Syndrome

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he will take to reduce prejudice against and misunderstanding of the clinical needs of Down's Syndrome patients within the NHS. [100194]

Mr. Hutton: We have already published good practice guidance on health services for people with learning disabilities: "Signposts for Success" (on commissioning and providing health services for people with learning disabilities) and "Once a Day" (for primary health care teams). We propose to build on these by ensuring that the clinical needs of people with Down's Syndrome are fully considered in our work to develop the new Government Learning Disability Strategy.

Herbal Remedies

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the nature and scope of the proposed forthcoming recommendations from the European Commission for possible amendments to EU Directive 75/318 relating to herbal remedies; and if he will make a statement. [100252]

Ms Stuart: The Commission Directive 99/83 EC, adopted in September 1999, amends the Annexe to Directive 75/318 EC. This new Directive provides additional guidance on the data required to meet efficacy and safety requirements where a company seeking marketing authorisation wishes to use bibliographical data for the purposes of establishing that the product has a well established use. We will shortly be bringing forward an amendment to the Medicines for Human Use (Marketing Authorisations Etc.) Regulations 1994 to incorporate the change into United Kingdom legislation.

It has become evident recently that there is uncertainty among a number of European Union member states on how to interpret 99/83 EC. We wish to provide stability and certainty for business. Accordingly, the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) is currently raising the issue with the European Medicines Evaluation Agency and the European Commission with a view to achieving greater clarity over interpretation. The MCA will also be discussing this question with our statutory advisory bodies, the Medicines Commission and the Committee on Safety of Medicines.

In on-going discussions in the EU over the interpretation of Directive 99/83 EC, and over the possible creation of an additional category of traditionally used medicines, our objective for herbal remedies will be to achieve proportionate regulatory arrangements, effectively balancing consumer choice and public safety. In working towards this objective, the MCA will continue its programme of informal dialogue with the UK natural health sector.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to update the list of specified or toxic herbs which are subject to restrictions on sale and supply set out in the Schedule to the Medicines (Retail Sale or Supply of Herbal Remedies) Order 1977. [100253]

Ms Stuart: At Ministers' request, the Medicines Control Agency has considered the need to update the lists of herbs which are subject to restrictions on sale and supply set out in the Schedule to the Medicines (Retail Sale or Supply of Herbal Remedies) Order 1977. The agency believes that the protection of public health will be best served by updating the lists, and work is in progress to that end. Any proposals will be subject to public consultation.

Mental Health Act 1983

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has evaluated regarding the role of paramedics currently involved in conveying people to hospital under the Mental Health Act 1983; and what training will be provided to enable the police to convey people appropriately. [100780]

Mr. Hutton: We know of no research on the role of paramedics involved in conveying people to hospital under the Mental Health Act. It is for individual chief constables to consider their forces' training needs in specific areas of work. National police training includes some formal training on mental illness, supplemented by practical role play exercises, during the course of the fifteen-week residential phase of the probationer training programme undertaken by all recruits to police forces other than the Metropolitan Police (which has its own training programme, including training on mental illness).

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will encourage other police forces to adopt the arrangements which exist between the Metropolitan Police and the London Ambulance Service regarding the transport to hospital of people with excited delirium and people detained under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983. [100781]

Mr. Hutton: The Mental Health Act 1983 Code of Practice encourages the development of local protocols by all the agencies involved in the operation of section 136 of the Mental Health Act. This section gives the police power to remove to a place of safety mentally disordered people found in a place to which the public have access and who are considered to be in immediate need of care or control. I understand that, in accordance with the Code of Practice, the Metropolitan Police and the London Ambulance Service are currently discussing a draft procedure to be followed on the transport to hospital of people who have been arrested under s136 of the Act. Once finalised, this will supplement existing guidance on admitting mentally ill patients to hospital and I would expect that both authorities would be willing to make it available to other organisations with an interest in these matters.

GP Referrals

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what right NHS patients have to access to information on the length of consultants' waiting lists before they are referred for treatment by their general practitioners; and if he will make a statement. [100643]

Ms Stuart: Patients are entitled to ask their general practitioner about the length of the hospital consultants' waiting lists in their area before being referred to a consultant. Most National Health Service trusts routinely send information to local GPs on waiting times for their consultants, and patients can access this information by phoning the Health Information Service on freephone 0800 66 55 44.

The Department also publishes data on the Internet on how long patients have waited for outpatient appointments and how long people are waiting on in-patient lists by speciality and by NHS trust.

Children's Rights

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to ensure that legislation affecting the rights of the child is available in a language and format suitable for children. [100906]

Mr. Hutton: Information about children's rights is increasingly available in a language and format suitable for children.

The Department has published summaries of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, some of which are available in minority languages, and leaflets on the Children Act 1989. Major child care voluntary organisations have also produced valuable materials for use in schools and other settings, some of which have been funded by central government.

Prozac

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the possible adverse reactions to Prozac (Fluoixtine), including reported cases of depression and suicide. [99940]

Ms Stuart: As with all medicines the safety of Prozac is continually monitored by the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) and the independent expert advisory body, the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM). The possible association of suicidal thoughts and hostile behaviour with Prozac was reviewed by the MCA and CSM in 1990. The available evidence did not suggest an increased risk with Prozac.

It is well known that suicidal ideation is associated with depression. Features of depression, including suicidal behaviour, can worsen after introduction of any anti-depressant prior to its beneficial effects being apparent and therefore reports of suicide attempts associated with Prozac are not unexpected. The Summary of Product Characteristics for Prozac warns that the possibility of a suicide attempt may persist until significant remission of depression occurs.

Cystic Fibrosis

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received opposed to the extension of free prescriptions to adults with cystic fibrosis. [100111]

Ms Stuart: No such extension has been proposed. We have therefore received no representations opposed to it.

NHS Employee Opinion Survey

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made on the development of a core employee opinion survey for use by NHS trusts; and if he will make a statement. [100938]

Mr. Denham: All National Health Service employers are required under the NHS human resources framework, "Working Together", to have conducted an annual staff attitude survey by April 2000.

Guidance for NHS employers on good practice in designing, administering and acting upon the results of employee opinion surveys will be issued shortly. It will describe core areas which all NHS employers should cover in their surveys.

There are no current plans to develop a core employee opinion survey for use by all NHS trusts.

Cottage Hospital, Epsom

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons the question tabled on 8 October by the hon. Member for Thurrock concerning the cottage hospital at Epsom was not answered. [100935]

Mr. Denham: I apologise to my hon. Friend that he did not receive a reply to his earlier question. This was due to an administrative error.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what services are provided at the cottage hospital in the vicinity of Horton Country Park, Epsom. [100940]

Mr. Denham: The New Epsom and Ewell Cottage Hospital which is part of Epsom and St. Helier National Health Service Trust is a 20-bedded general practitioner hospital. It takes patients with any diagnosis i.e. medical, post-surgery and the terminally ill but not the mentally ill.

It has an outpatient department covering a range of services from general medicine, general surgery, dermatology, rheumatology, ear, nose and throat, audiology and plastic surgery. GPs do minor operation sessions there.

The hospital is also a base for nurse-led clinics for stoma, breast and urology. It is also a base for a district nursing service, health visitors for the elderly and a continence advisory service. There is also a rehabilitation team, comprising occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, chiropodists and the hospital at home team.

Winter Pressures Funding

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has for additional funding for winter pressures for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [100936]

Ms Stuart: There are no plans to provide additional money for winter pressures in 1999–2000. The 5.1 per cent. over and above inflation increase in National Health Service expenditure awarded by the Government is allowing health authorities to plan more effectively for the health and social needs of their populations, including the provision of services throughout the winter.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education (Leicestershire)

15. **Mr. Tredinnick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact of the current level of Government funding for Leicestershire on education in the county. [99355]

Ms Estelle Morris: Leicestershire will be getting an extra £12.8 million for 2000–01. It is very important that this extra funding is delivered to education by the county. They did not do so last year—I hope they will do it this time.

Science A-levels

17. **Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of *(a)* girls and *(b)* boys who take A-levels obtain at least one science A-level. [99359]

Mr. Wicks: Of A-level candidates in 1998, 48 per cent. of boys and 32 per cent. of girls passed at least one science subject. However, more girls than boys taking a science A-level gained a pass.

New Deal

18. **Mrs. Gilroy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the New Deal for Lone Parents. [99360]

Ms Hodge: The programme is working well. Since October 1998, 93,690 lone parents have voluntarily agreed to have at least an initial interview with a personal adviser and 89 per cent. of those have agreed to participate further. 23,000 have found jobs.

19. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the destination of those young people in Sussex who have completed the New Deal programme without securing long-term employment. [99361]

Ms Jowell: We know that over 1,100 young people left New Deal in Sussex for sustained work. Over 750 did not tell the Employment Service their reason for leaving but a recent survey suggests that over half of them will have found work. A further 850 left for a variety of destinations including education, training and sickness or other benefits.

20. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much has been spent on all aspects of promotion of the New Deal. [99362]

Ms Jowell: A sum of £19,657,565 has been spent on promoting New Deal to employers and unemployed people. This has resulted in high levels of awareness of New Deal and positive attitudes towards it among employers and unemployed people. It helped ensure that large numbers of employers offered good quality job vacancies to those on New Deal and it demonstrably improved the motivation of unemployed people.

34. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress of the New Deal for the unemployed. [99377]

Ms Jowell: The New Deal for young unemployed people continues to make good progress towards our manifesto target of moving 250,000 young people into work, which we expect to meet next year. By the end of September 1999 over 155,500 young people had found work through the New Deal, and more than 101,000 young people had benefited from training or work experience.

Ms Keeble: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps the Government are taking to improve access to financial services for people on the New Deal. [99345]

Mr. Blunkett: I am pleased that earlier this year we signed an agreement with the Royal Bank of Scotland that allows New Deal participants easier access to banking facilities. I expect other banks will follow this lead.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the level of staff turnover among personal advisers in the New Deal programme since its inception in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* Greater London and *(c)* Leaside District; and if he will make a statement. [99641]

Ms Jowell: Information relating to the job title of Employment Service employees is not held on our central HR Information System. The estimation of the level of staff turnover for personal advisers would therefore be at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his Department's plans for the development of the New Deal for those over 25 years. [99357]

Ms Jowell: We have set aside £100 million next year to enhance the existing New Deal for long term unemployed people aged 25 and over. Building on this, and to give every unemployed adult the best possible chance of finding a job, we will introduce a strengthened package of help for unemployed people aged 25 and over from April 2001, which will include a range of enhanced, work focused and high quality options for all participants.

Standards Fund

21. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent representations he has received about the operation of the standards fund. [99364]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend has received a number of representations about the funding of schools and local education authorities, including the standards fund.

Internet

22. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to prevent children at school accessing inappropriate material via the internet. [99365]

Mr. Wills: We are determined that pupils should be protected from unsuitable material while accessing the wealth of educationally valuable material on the internet. DfEE and the British Educational Communications and

Technology agency (BECTa) have produced a detailed information pack for teachers and parents about pupils' safe use of the internet. The Superhighway Safety pack, which is available free and is also on the National Grid for Learning, provides guidance on the wide range of measures which schools can adopt. These range from using walled gardens and filtering software, to monitoring and tracking pupil access and providing "user contracts" for pupils, spelling out how they should behave.

The Grid itself is a safe area of the internet, with all sites linked to it conforming to ground rules and a code of conduct. Content must not contain unsuitable material, or links to unsuitable material. Linked sites are required to co-operate fully with GridWatch, which provides a reporting mechanism in the event of unsuitable material appearing on the Grid, as well as immediate remedial action.

Asylum Seekers (Children's Education)

24. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to assist local councils in making provision for the education of children of asylum seekers who do not speak English. [99367]

Jacqui Smith: Children of asylum seekers are entitled to education in the same way as all other children and local education authorities receive funding for their education in the same way as for other pupils on school rolls. Children of asylum seekers who do not speak English receive extra help at school to develop their language skills through the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Grant, which is over £430 million for the next three years.

Performance-related Pay (Teachers)

25. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the funding arrangements he intends to put in place to finance performance-related pay for teachers. [99368]

Ms Estelle Morris: We will establish a Special Grant to target resources for the performance threshold separate from schools' delegated budgets. Schools will be able to draw additional funds from this grant via their local education authority for each teacher promoted to the upper pay spine. There will be no quota on threshold successes.

We are considering the most appropriate mechanism for funding other pay costs deriving from the Green Paper proposals.

Disruptive Pupils

26. **Dr. Naysmith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to assist schools in dealing with disruptive pupils. [99369]

Jacqui Smith: We are making some £500 million available over three years for projects to tackle truancy, exclusion and disruption. This is backed up with new guidance "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" on attendance, behaviour, the use of exclusion and re-integration. In addition, the Excellence in Cities initiative includes the provision of Learning Mentors and Learning Support Units to help schools better manage disruptive pupils.

I recently hosted a seminar to consider the principal issues about the education of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. We shall consider carefully the many constructive suggestions that were made.

Textile Industry

28. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will assess the impact of recent purchasing decisions by Marks and Spencer on employment in the textile industry; and what measures he plans to take in response. [99371]

Ms Jowell: The commercial decisions of private companies are a matter for them, and the DfEE do not assess the employment implications of individual cases. In a dynamic modern economy, jobs are being created and lost all the time. However, the total number of people in employment in the UK is growing—up by over 700,000 in the last two and a half years.

The Employment Service is there to help all individuals who lose their job to find another one, and most do so quickly. In addition to advice with jobsearch, re-training help is available for those who find it difficult to get work in their previous occupation, while people affected by a redundancy that has a significant impact on a local labour market can get access to ES programmes straight away. The Government have also established Rapid Response Units to ensure that, when a major redundancy occurs, the help individuals need to get back to work is quickly in place.

With specific reference to textiles and clothing, my colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry have taken a keen interest in the work of the Textiles and Clothing Strategy Group, which has been looking at ways in which the UK's textiles and clothing industry can become more internationally competitive.

Special Educational Needs

29. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to ensure equal opportunity and access for children who have special educational needs. [99372]

Jacqui Smith: The Government's strategy for raising standards for pupils with special educational needs is set out in the document "Meeting Special Educational Needs: A programme of action" published in November 1998. One strand of this programme was to expand the Schools Access Initiative to fund capital allocations to make mainstream schools more accessible to pupils with disabilities. We have allocated £20 million in the 1999–2000 financial year and expect to allocate a further £80 million over the next two years.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how he proposes to consult with children with disabilities on the provisions of the proposed Special Educational Needs Bill. [100905]

Jacqui Smith: The Special Educational Needs Bill will incorporate undertakings made in "Meeting Special Educational Needs: A Programme of Action", which were drawn up following extensive consultation—including with disabled children and their representatives—on the Green Paper "Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs".

In consulting on the Bill, we will welcome comments from all interested parties including children with disabilities.

Specialist Schools

30. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the success of specialist schools. [99373]

Ms Estelle Morris: Specialist schools submit annual reports about progress against their targets and we monitor their examination performance compared with the performance of all other schools. Their examination success is illustrated by their average 2.5 percentage point improvement in GCSE 5 or more A* to C results between 1998 and 1999 compared with an average of 1.5 percentage points for all other schools. Research projects about the effectiveness of the specialist schools programme carried out by the London School of Economics and Leeds University will be reporting soon and will be published in the new year.

Rural Schools

31. **Mr. Peter Bradley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many rural schools were closed *(a)* between 1979 and 1997 and *(b)* since May 1997; and if he will make a statement on the future of rural schools. [99374]

Jacqui Smith: We estimate that around 450 rural primary schools closed between 1983 and 1998. Since the increased protection for rural schools that we announced in February 1998, only six such schools have been approved for closure. We are determined to preserve access to local schools for rural communities, and our guidance to local education authorities and school organisation committees makes clear that the presumption should continue to be against the closure of rural schools.

Local Education Authorities

32. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the criteria in the funding formula for local education authorities. [99375]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend is well aware that there are problems with the current funding formula for local authorities. We looked at this issue in our first year in office. But there was no consensus among the various different groups of local authorities about the way forward. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister therefore announced in December 1998 that we would conduct a fundamental review in partnership with local government: we expect to make proposals emerging from the review by the summer of 2000.

Class Sizes

33. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on class sizes in secondary schools in England since May 1997. [99376]

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on average class sizes in secondary schools. [99370]

Ms Estelle Morris: The average size of classes in secondary schools remains at less than 22. That is around six below the figure for primary schools. Between January 1998 and January 1999 overall class size figures dropped from 24.9 to 24.8. Over the same period the overall pupil-teacher ratio fell from 18.9 to 18.8. Both these statistics represent the first reductions in 10 years. We have not only stopped the year on year increases seen under the previous Administration, but are reversing the trend towards higher average class sizes and pupil-teacher ratios.

Learning Through Landscapes

35. **Mr. Efford:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the effects of the learning through landscapes project on schools in Eltham. [99378]

Jacqui Smith: The school grounds programme in Eltham is managed by Learning through Landscapes in partnership with Greenwich Local Education Authority, and with support from The Bridge House Estate's Trust Fund and the Sir John Cass's Foundation. The programme is accountable to these partners but, as an original promoter of Learning through Landscapes, my Department would be interested to receive reports of the achievements of the Eltham project in due course.

GCSEs

36. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress the Government have made towards achieving their targets in respect of GCSEs. [99379]

Ms Estelle Morris: This year's GSCE results have improved for the fourth year running and indicate that we are on course to achieve the national targets for Key Stage 4 for 2002.

Further Education

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in encouraging young people to remain in further education. [99358]

Mr. Wicks: The Government have a range of policies to encourage young people to remain in further education. For example, the £275 million Further Education Standards Fund will help to promote better retention rates in colleges; and our new student support arrangements, with an additional £30 million funding, will also help young people to keep studying.

Secondary Education

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on expenditure on secondary education since April 1997. [99366]

Ms Estelle Morris: The unit cost per secondary school pupil in England in 1997–98 was £2,480. This rose to £2,490 in 1998–99. We expect the upward trend to continue and have provided funding to ensure that it does. The projected estimates for the period to 2001–02 are as follows:

Year	£
1999–2000	2,540
2000–01	2,610
2001–02	2,680

In contrast, between 1992–93 and 1997–98, secondary funding fell by £200 per pupil.

Employee Development Schemes

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to encourage the involvement of trade unions in employee development schemes. [99938]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* My Department provides support to encourage trade union participation in Employee Development Schemes and other workplace learning activities in a number of ways:

(i) through the Union Learning Fund, established in May 1998, which encourages trade unions to build their capacity as learning organisations. The fund supports trade union influenced workplace learning activities. A total of £12 million is allocated to the Fund;

(ii) through co-funding projects that help the TUC to develop case studies and good practice. For example, a project that encourages the use of individual learning accounts as a mechanism for adding value to Employee Development Schemes and the TUC publications "Employee Development Schemes—case studies of union involvement" and "Trade Unions and Employee Development Schemes—a negotiator's guide";

(iii) the TEC funded Bargaining for Skills projects have helped trade unions to raise awareness of Investors in People. Unions have use the Standard as a tool to develop skills in the workplace and to ensure the long term employability of their own staff and members.

Education Spending

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the extra money for education announced under the Comprehensive Spending Review (Cm 4011) includes contributions from local authorities. [100840]

Mr. Blunkett: The £19 billion additional funding for education across the UK (£16 billion in England) is made up of increases in central Government spending and in amounts allocated through Education Standard Spending Assessments for local authorities.

St. Luke's Primary School, Worksop

Mr. Ashton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will investigate the delay to the extension to St. Luke's Primary School, Shireoaks, Worksop, Nottinghamshire; why there has been no response from his Department to documentation submitted by the architects; and if he will make a statement. [101074]

Ms Estelle Morris: Officials gave approval that this project proceed to tender on 24 November 1998 subject to confirmation from Nottinghamshire Local Education Authority that the phasing of spending could be contained within the overall "Local Education Authority Minor Works" allocation. This confirmation was given on 8 December 1998. It is for the school, diocese and Local Education Authority to agree when the project should proceed to the next stage—that is, the invitation of tenders—and advise the Department accordingly in order to allow the subsequent release of grant. It is understood from the consultant/architects acting for the school in this matter, that the Department will receive relevant documentation shortly and it is hoped that this will enable matters to be progressed.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Kingston Internet

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department under what circumstances the Lord Chancellor's Department has required a website to be closed. [101091]

Mr. Lock: The Department's attention was recently drawn to material on a webspace provided by Kingston Internet to a Mr. J. F. Hulbert which contained a series of defamatory allegations against individually named judges and court staff. Consequently, the Department wrote to Kingston Internet drawing its attention to the material and inviting the company's proposals for closing the site. However, it was for Kingston Internet to consider whether the use of the webspace complied with the terms of its contract with Mr. Hulbert and it subsequently disabled the webspace.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent communications there have been between the Lord Chancellor's Department and Kingston Internet Ltd. [101090]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department wrote to Kingston Internet on 25 October drawing attention to material on a website provided by that company to Mr. J. F. Hulbert. On 4 November the company responded indicating that it had disabled the webspace. This crossed with a letter from the Department of 5 November inquiring whether any consideration had been given to the letter of 25 October. The Department's letter of 5 November was in turn acknowledged by the company on 9 November. There have been no further communications between the Department and the company.

Inquests (Legal Aid)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department under what circumstances

and for what special reasons legal aid can be made available to enable bereaved families to be legally represented at inquests. [100715]

Mr. Lock: An inquest is an inquiry concerned with the facts surrounding a death, rather than issues such as civil or criminal liability. Legal representation is generally considered unnecessary. Full civil legal aid is therefore not available to someone appearing at an inquest. Legal advice and assistance may be available under the Green Form scheme to those who are financially eligible in connection with inquests.

Under section 4 of the Legal Aid Act 1988, it is possible in exceptional circumstances for the Lord Chancellor to direct that help be given in cases where it would otherwise not be available. In future, the Legal Services Commission (successor to the Legal Aid Board) will be able to seek authorisation from the Lord Chancellor to provide funding, under section 6(8)(b) of the Access to Justice Act 1999, for representation in exceptional cases where they believe that funding is warranted. My Department is currently considering with the Home Office the criteria to take into account in deciding what constitutes an exceptional case in respect of an inquest, and will seek the views of interested parties.

Judicial Appointments (Peach Report)

Angela Smith: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor will publish Sir Leonard Peach's report on the operation of the appointments procedures in relation to all judicial appointments and Queen's Counsel. [101594]

Jane Kennedy: Sir Leonard Peach's report is being published tomorrow. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Archives

Ms Keeble: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he proposes to publish a policy statement on archives. [101475]

Mr. Lock: The first ever Government policy on archives is published today. Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The report is also available on the internet.

Archive services have both governmental and cultural functions. Effective records management is essential to good governance, and at the same time, our documentary heritage is a crucially important cultural asset. The revolution in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) gives the archives sector the opportunity to make major advances in both areas and to provide genuinely inclusive services to ethnic minorities, women and young people who are under-represented among archive users.

The policy document has been produced by all the Government Departments with a responsibility for archives. It is an example of how joined-up government works to good practical effect. It will provide a framework for future Government thinking and action on archival matters.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) how much his Department has spent on civil servants' transport in each of the last two years; [98692]

(2) how much his Department has spent on Ministerial transport in each of the last two years. [98691]

Mr. Battle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office, 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 256W.

GCHQ

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who has responsibility for payment of energy bills at GCHQ in Cheltenham following the signing of the relevant PFI contract; what criteria the contract includes covering energy efficiency requirements; and if he will make a statement. [100804]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 1 December 1999]:* GCHQ will be responsible for the energy costs. The contract requires that the Private Sector Provider (PSP) minimises energy usage, use of natural resources and associated operational costs over the life of the building.

GCHQ has an objective to be energy efficient and environmentally friendly in line with Government policy. The PSP's contribution to this objective will be addressed in the design of the building.

EU Code of Conduct for Arms Sales

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to ensure that the licensing authorities of *(a)* the Channel Islands and *(b)* other UK Dependent Territories are subject to the EU Code of Conduct for Arms Sales; and if he will make a statement. [99939]

Mr. Hain: I will write to the right hon. and learned Member shortly.

Strategic Export Controls

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to include a summary of licences issued by the Channel Islands and Dependent Territories in future annual reports by the UK Government on Strategic Export Controls; and if he will make a statement. [100113]

Mr. Hain: None at present. But we will review the format and content of future reports, taking into account responses to the first two Annual Reports and, in particular, the eventual conclusions of the Joint Inquiry being carried out by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs, Defence, Trade and Industry, and International Development Committees.

Kosovo

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* Serbs, *(b)* Roma, *(c)* Bosniaks, *(d)* Montenegrins, *(e)* Turks and *(f)* other minorities have been abducted in Kosovo since

the KFOR occupation; how many have (i) been rescued, (ii) left Kosovo since the KFOR occupation and (iii) been murdered since the KFOR occupation; and how many people have been charged with offences against *(a)* to *(f)* since the KFOR occupation. [101119]

Mr. Vaz: Since KFOR's deployment in Kosovo on 12 June 1999 and mid-November, there have been 137 abductions reported, including 43 Serbs and 77 Albanians. No figures are available for other minorities abducted nor for the number rescued.

UNMIK estimate that 97,000 Serbs remain in Kosovo from a pre-war population of around 200,000. It is estimated that between 6,000 and 7,000 Roma or "Gypsies" remain in Kosovo. Pre-war population figures for Roma are not exact. The 1991 census figure for Roma in Kosovo was 45,000.

In the same period from 12 June to mid-November, 379 murders have been reported in Kosovo. Of these 139 were Serbs, 145 Albanians and 99 of unknown ethnic origin. There are no details for the number of people charged with these offences.

TREASURY

Consolidated Fund

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the instances in which sums required for fulfilling guarantees made by the Government were charged on and issued out of the Consolidated Fund in each of the last five years. [100745]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Such sums are normally paid out of voted moneys. While Departments are advised that they should consider whether an immediate statement should be made to Parliament in respect of a maturing contingent liability of this kind, information is not collected centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. There have been no payments under guarantees charged by statute directly on the Consolidated Fund in the last five years.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is the policy of the Government that sums required for fulfilling guarantees given by the Export Credits Guarantee Department are charged on and issued out of the Consolidated Fund. [100744]

Mr. Timms: It is established Supply procedure for departmental payments such as claims in respect of guarantees issued by ECGD to be made out of moneys voted by Parliament. An excess requirement would necessitate drawing on the Consolidated Fund.

Government Resources and Accounts Bill

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has for a body to be set up under Clause 15 of the Government Resources and Accounts Bill to undertake projects outside the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [100743]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government Resources and Accounts Bill includes provisions to enable the Treasury to incur expenditure in respect of the formation of Partnerships UK and to provide financial assistance to it. The exact size and nature of any commitments will be determined during the development process, which is currently under way. The legislation means that Partnerships UK will not be precluded from carrying on public private business outside the UK.

EU Budget Council

Mr. Jim Marshall: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the outcome of the Budget Council held in Brussels on 25–26 November; and if he will make a statement. [100571]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Budget Council gave its second reading to the Draft EC Budget for 2000 on 25 and 26 November. This was consistent with UK objectives. The Council was firmly against any reopening of the financial perspective agreed at Berlin. The Council fully respects the EU's obligations with respect to needs in Kosovo, and is clear that the EU's share of reconstruction activity in Kosovo can be met without revising the financial perspective ceiling.

Population Growth

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the 10 fastest growing towns and cities in England which had the fastest population growth. [100789]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Tony Clarke, dated 2 December 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question asking for the ten fastest growing towns and cities in England on the basis of current population growth.

The ONS does not produce population estimates for towns and cities. The smallest areas for which population estimates are produced are unitary and local authority areas. The following ten unitary and local authority areas have shown the largest percentage increase in population between mid-1991 and mid-1998, which is the latest year for which population estimates are available.

East Cambridgeshire,
Westminster,
Kensington and Chelsea,
Forest Heath,
Milton Keynes UA,
Elmbridge,
Worcester,
North Dorset,
Bracknell Forest UA,
Cambridge.

Married Couples Tax Allowances

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of new pensioner couples who will be affected by the withdrawal of married tax allowances. [99085]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* Today's pensioner couples will keep the married couples allowance. Any couple where at least one spouse is 65 or over before 6 April 2000 will continue to be able to claim the allowance. In addition, any new pensioner

couples—single people aged 65 or over before 6 April 2000—who subsequently marry will be able to start claiming the allowance after they marry.

EU Economic and Finance Council

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the outcome of the ECOFIN Council held in Brussels on 29 November; and if he will make a statement. [101478]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer attended the Economics and Finance Council of Ministers. The Paymaster General; in her capacity of chair of the Code of Conduct Group, was also present.

The Council adopted a directive on electronic money.

There was a discussion of the so-called "tax package" (code of conduct on business taxation, taxation of savings, and elimination of withholding taxes on cross-border interest and royalty payments between companies). The United Kingdom position, set out in its paper on international bonds presented by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the informal meeting of the Council in September, remains unchanged. A draft report from the Council to the European Council was agreed.

Following discussion, the Presidency concluded that Greece no longer had an excessive deficit. The formal decision would go to a future Council as an 'A' point.

The Council finalised their report on Economic Policy Co-ordination, which will go to next week's European Council in Helsinki.

The President of the European Court of Auditors gave an oral report on the Court's Annual Report published earlier this month outlining the priorities for reform.

The Council discussed the progress of the Financial Services Action Plan, and draft Council conclusions, submitted by the Presidency, were agreed without discussion.

The Commission gave a report on Financial Management and stated that improving it was one of their top priorities.

Diesel/Water Emulsion Fuels

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he proposes to treate, for excise duty purposes, the water content of diesel/water emulsion fuels. [101595]

Mr. Timms: Both EU and UK law make any liquid that is added to fuel liable to duty, even water. We do not think that is fair. We shall therefore be applying to the European Commission for a derogation enabling us to propose an amendment to the law in the next Finance Bill.

EU Commission Draft Own Resources Directive

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures are planned for an explanation of Commission Own Resources for entry into force in 2002 under the Berlin Conclusions; and if such will lead to an increase in the Communities budget. [101034]

Miss Melanie Johnson: An explanatory memorandum on the Commission's Draft Own Resources Decision that enacts the agreement reached in Berlin was sent to the European Scrutiny Committees on 28 July 1999. The new Draft Decision maintains the Own Resources ceiling.

Cologne European Council

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the future role of the European central bank in employment policy, pursuant to the Cologne Summit, with particular reference to the macro-economic dialogue. [101028]

Miss Melanie Johnson: It is recognised in the UK and across the EU that long-term, sustainable job creation requires a macro-economic climate of stability and steady growth. The addition to the European Employment Pact at the Cologne European Council of a macro-economic dialogue is a recognition of this fact. As Annexe I of the Cologne Conclusions makes clear, the dialogue is intended to be

"a confidence building and confidential exchange of ideas"

among a variety of policy actors for a better understanding of the best way to achieve macro-economic stability and hence facilitate long-term job creation. The European central bank, along with governments and social partners, will play an important role in these discussions.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will define the combat of harmful tax competition as referred to in section 22 of the Cologne Council Conclusions; and what measures are currently under discussion at EU level on this issue. [101031]

Dawn Primarolo: The conclusions of the ECOFIN Council meeting on 1 December 1997 concerning taxation policy state that there is a

> "need for coordinated action at European level to tackle harmful tax competition in order to help achieve certain objectives such as reducing the continuing distortions in the single market, preventing excessive losses of tax revenue or getting tax structures to develop in a more employment friendly way".

There have been regular discussions in the Council of the proposed "tax package".

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the UK will be subject to the provisions of section 19 of the Cologne Council Conclusions on *(a)* increased policy co-ordination, *(b)* dialogue between the social partners, *(c)* dialogue with the European Central Bank and *(d)* development of the European Employment Pact. [101029]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Section 19 of the Cologne Conclusions refers to the Council's adoption of Broad Economic Policy Guidelines of member states and the Community. The UK Government support the use of non-binding Broad Economic Policy Guidelines as a means of developing a co-ordinated macro-economic policy mix. They welcome the involvement of a variety of relevant policy actors—including both sides of industry and the ECB—in this process through the macro-economic dialogue, agreed at the Cologne Council as a third prong in the European Employment Pact.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures are understood by *(a)* limitation of the burden imposed on low-skilled and low-paid workers and

(b) characterising retirement provision by responsibility towards future generations, in the report to the European Council at the Cologne Summit on the European Employment Pact. [101026]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The European Employment Pact recognises the importance of improving the incentives for people to work and ensuring that employment policies are sustainable. An appropriate incentive structure is one that reduces the burdens of tax on low-paid workers and ensures that they are better off in work than on benefits. The Government have implemented a number of reform measures to put this into place. The Working Families Tax Credit, reforms to National Insurance Contributions, the new 10p rate of income tax and the cut in the basic rate to 22p all reduce the burden of tax on labour, and help to ensure work pays for everyone. A long-term approach to fiscal sustainability must include a strategy to cope with demographic change, including population aging. To this end, member states—the UK included—have an interest in pursuing fiscal and budgetary policies which respect the objectives of the Stability and Growth Pact.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on, and clarify the intent of, section 24 of the Cologne Presidency Conclusions. [101032]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Section 24 of the Presidency Conclusions from the Cologne European Council relates to a proposal enabling member states to introduce a lower VAT rate on labour-intensive services for a three-year trial period beginning in January 2000. With a view to making the taxation system more employment friendly, member states are invited, without obligation, to examine this proposal.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the implementation of appropriate wage development, as called for in section 20 of the Cologne Presidency Conclusions; which sectors of employment are referred to; what his policy is thereto; and what his Department defines as appropriate. [101030]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The maintenance of "appropriate wage development", in the context of section 20 of the Cologne European Council conclusions is an essential factor in achieving macro-economic stability, in particular in keeping control of inflation. As section 20 makes clear, this is particularly imperative for the Euro 11 (the group of countries adopting the Euro in the first wave). The Cologne Conclusions do not bind the Government to specific policy measures on wage developments; however, the Government believe it is important that wage developments across all sectors reflect productivity and labour market conditions and accord with the aim of maintaining low inflation and a stable macro-economic climate.

European Central Bank

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Court of Auditors will have access to all documents held by the European Central Bank. [101033]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Under Article 27.2 of the Statute of the European System of Central Banks and of the European Central Bank, the Court of Auditors shall have access to the accounts of all revenue and expenditure in an examination of the operational efficiency of the management of the ECB.

Petrol

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reasons lead replacement petrol is subject to higher duty than unleaded petrol. [101092]

Mr. Timms: Although LRP does not contain lead, it will generally be used by cars that formerly used leaded petrol. This part of the car population tends to be older and less fuel efficient than newer cars and consequently to have poorer emissions performance. The higher duty rate continues to keep in place an incentive for replacement of less fuel efficient cars.

NIRS2

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many items of data are waiting to be input onto national insurance records held on the NIRS2 computer system. [100915]

Mr. Timms: The information requested is not available.

Fuel Duty Escalator

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will assess the cost to the Treasury of exempting *(a)* the police, *(b)* the Fire and Rescue Service and *(c)* the Ambulance Service from the effects of the fuel duty escalator. [100061]

Mr. Timms: The Chancellor announced in the Pre-Budget Report statement that the pre-announced fuel escalator will no longer apply. Instead decisions will be made Budget by Budget.

Incomes (North Staffordshire)

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people are in receipt of working families tax credit in the *(a)* Stoke-on-Trent and *(b)* Stoke-on-Trent, South parliamentary constituencies. [99876]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates for the numbers in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit in the Stoke-on-Trent, South parliamentary constituency are not yet available.

Third World Debt

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the likely cost to the British exchequer of the debt cancellation package agreed at the recent G7 Cologne summit. [100044]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The debt cancellation package agreed at the G7 Cologne Summit and subsequently endorsed at the IMF/World Bank Annual Meetings provides for the cancellation of 90 per cent. or more of commercial debt in the Paris Club and 100 per cent. forgiveness of ODA debt. The UK has, of course, already cancelled all of its ODA loans ($5 billion in 98 prices). The costs of cancellation of commercial debts under the terms of the Cologne deal will fall to the Export Credit Guarantee Department (ECGD), where debt written off is scored as losses against ECGD's recoverable assets.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Tourism

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what national body is responsible for marketing tourism within England. [100259]

Janet Anderson: The British Tourist Authority continues to market England abroad as part of its overall remit. It does so in partnership with the Regional Tourist Boards and the English Tourism Council, with which it has an Overseas Marketing Agreement. Domestically, the English Tourism Council retains a strategic policy overview of marketing and has a major role in carrying out market research and providing advice on techniques and best practice.

Television Licences

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if pensioners over-75 years who are to receive free television licences will also be exempt from a future digital licence fee supplement. [100048]

Janet Anderson: No decision has been made on the recommendation of the independent review panel on the future funding of the BBC for a digital television licence supplement for people using digital receivers.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many pensioner households will not benefit from the introduction of a free television licence for the over-75s. [99072]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* An estimated 4.6 million pensioner households do not include a member who is aged 75 or over.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, (1) pursuant to his answer of 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 155–56W, on TV licence concessions for 60, 75-year-olds and over, what assessment he has made of the number of households that will benefit in each of the next three years; [100473]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 155–56W, on concessionary TV licences for pensioners aged over 75 years, if he will estimate the cost, at current prices, of providing licences in each of the next three years. [100472]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to my earlier reply on 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 155–56W. The available forecasts of household numbers, by age group, are not sufficiently accurate to enable detailed information to be provided for future years. The costs of the concession will also be affected by the precise structure of the scheme, which the Government intend to announce shortly.

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the cost of making television licences available at no cost to all pensioners. [100572]

Janet Anderson: The estimated cost of providing free television licences to all households including a pensioner would be nearly £700 million a year, while the cost of free television licences for all pensioner-only households would be approximately £490 million a year.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many more pensioners would benefit if the free television licence concession was extended to all households comprised only of people of state pensionable age; and how much this would cost in each of the next 10 years. [99670]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* There are an estimated 3 million households consisting only of people of state pensionable age but below the age of 75, of which approximately 100,000 qualify for the existing concessionary television licence. The estimated cost of providing free television licences to all such households is approximately £290 million a year at current licence fee levels. Costs in future years would depend on the number of households consisting solely of pensioners below the age of 75 and the level of the television licence fee, which is not fixed for the next 10 years.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many households comprising one or more people aged over 75 years are currently in receipt of a concessionary television licence. [100316]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* Detailed figures are not available, since records do not distinguish between beneficiaries who have attained the age of 75 and those who have not. However, it is estimated that approximately 500,000 households currently in receipt of a concessionary television licence include a person aged 75 or over.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on what date the scheme to provide free television licences to pensioners over the age of 75 will be introduced. [99860]

Janet Anderson: We will announce full details of the scheme, including the starting date, in the near future.

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many households with members over the age of 75 years will receive free television licences from August 2000; and how many households with members between the ages of 60 and 75 years will not receive free television licences. [100785]

Janet Anderson: Over three million households include a member aged 75 or over and will therefore benefit from the free television licences announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. We hope to announce details of the scheme, including the starting date, shortly. An estimated three million households consist only of people of state pensionable age but below the age of 75, of which approximately 100,000 qualify for the existing £5 concessionary television licence.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) how many people aged 75 years and over in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire will receive free television licences; and if he will make a statement; [101129]

(2) how many pensioners in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire will benefit from free television licences for those aged over 75 years; and if he will make a statement. [100591]

Janet Anderson: As at mid-1998, the latest date for which figures are available, the estimated number of people in Shrewsbury and Atcham County District aged 75 or over was 7,900 and the estimated number in the County of Shropshire 23,300. As the Government have announced, every pensioner aged 75 or over will receive their television licence free of charge.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if it is the policy of the Government that households with one or more people aged over 75 years should be able to enjoy free access to the digital services of the BBC. [100317]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* All BBC public service channels are and will continue to be available free-to-air to all licensed households with the necessary receiving equipment.

Corporate Assets

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his estimate is of the current value of property *(a)* in Scotland, *(b)* in England, *(c)* overseas and *(d)* in total held by (i) the BBC, (ii) the ITC, (iii) the Radio Authority, (iv) Channel 4, (v) the S4C and (vi) the Office of the National Lottery; and what is the value of other assets held by these bodies. [99826]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The value of property and other assets held by these organisations is:

£ million

	Property				
	England	*Scotland*	*Overseas*	*Total*	*Other assets*
BBC	434.8	8.0	15.1	477.90	1,407.0
ITC	2.5	0	0	2.5	1.7
Radio Authority	0	0	0	0	0.53
CH4	70.0	0	0	70.0	0
S4C	0	0	0	11.0	3.6
OFLOT	0	0	0	0	0.93
Total	507.3	8.0	15. 1	561.40	1,413.76

Note:

These figures are the latest available (1998–99). The total value of property held includes that held in Wales and Northern Ireland. S4C hold property only in Wales. OFLOT became the National Lottery Commission on 1 April 1999.

New Earnings Survey (Tourism)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport following the publication of the Government's New Earnings Survey, what action his Department is taking to reverse the trend of falling incomes among the lower-paid workers in the tourism industry. [100258]

Janet Anderson: It is not possible to draw conclusions about tourism as a whole from the New Earnings Survey because there is no single tourism industry. Average weekly earnings for people with manual occupations associated with tourism activities grew between 1998 and 1999 by at least the average increase in manual earnings for the economy as a whole.

Carn Brea Leisure Centre

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received regarding Kerrier District Council's decision to close Carn Brea Leisure Centre in Cornwall. [100228]

Kate Hoey: I have received numerous letters about the proposed closure of Carn Brea Leisure Centre. The majority of these have come from local schools and those in the surrounding area, which will lose the important swimming facilities provided by Carn Brea when the Centre closes. I also met a delegation of Leisure Centre users, led by my hon. Friend, on 23 November to discuss their concerns about the Centre's closure.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list those individuals and companies who have expressed an interest in *(a)* purchasing and *(b)* leasing the Millennium Dome after the end of the Millennium Experience. [99321]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* The competition to find a sustainable use for the Dome beyond the Millennium Experience was launched in March of this year. It is being managed on behalf of the Government by English Partnerships (EP), the urban regeneration agency for England, in co-operation with the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), the operating company for the Millennium Experience.

Initially, more than 60 organisations responded and their ability to deliver a possible future use for the site was assessed before issuing the invitation to a long short-list of 12. Those 12 organisations were asked to submit outline ideas by the end of October. Nine responses were received and assessment of their proposals are under way. Details of the nine responses remain commercially confidential.

The Government hope to make an announcement on the final short-list early in the new year. A final decision on the successful bidder will be made in the summer of 2000.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish a list of those invited to attend the Millennium Dome on 31 December, other than those described as ordinary members of the public. [99336]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* I hope the hon. Member will understand that for reasons of security it is not possible to publish a list of those invited to attend.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what advice his Department is giving to the Millennium Experience Company on the disposal of the Millennium Dome after 31 December 2000. [100261]

Janet Anderson: The Competition for the future use of the Dome was launched in March 1999, and is being run on behalf of the Government by English Partnerships

(EP), the urban regeneration agency for England, in co-operation with the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC).

Officials from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) are monitoring all stages of the competition and advise Ministers accordingly.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many accidents at work have been recorded so far during the construction and preparation of the Millennium Dome, broken down by quarter and by type of accident. [99337]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 1 December 1999]:* Accidents reported by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) under the requirements of the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR; SI 3165) are as follows and cover the period 1 August 1997 to 10 November 1999:

	1997	*1998*	*1999*
1st Quarter			
Major Specified Injuries[1]	—	1	0
Three Day Reportable Injuries[1]	—	1	1
2nd Quarter			
Major Specified	—	1	0
Three Day Reportable	—	0	5
3rd Quarter			
Major Specified	0	0	2
Three Day Reportable	3	0	4
4th Quarter			
Major Specified	1	2	[2]2
Three Day Reportable	0	1	[2]4

[1] As defined under RIDDOR (Major specified injuries include any break of bones except fingers or toes; three day reportable injuries are those where the injured person does not report for work for a three day period after the date of the accident)
[2] To date
Note:
There have been no fatalities on the site.

The accident frequency rate for the Dome site, which takes into account the number of injuries, the normal working life-span of employees and contractors and the number of hours worked, is below the national average established by the Health and Safety Executive. NMEC has provided Safety Induction Training for over 13,000 employees, contractors and sub-contractors. For a construction and work programme of the size and complexity of the Dome the RIDDOR figures reflect a laudable safety record.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will break down the construction costs of each zone within the Millennium Dome. [99338]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 1 December 1999]:* The New Millennium Experience Company considers the construction costs of each zone to be commercially sensitive. Release of the information could prejudice the company's ability to obtain optimum value for money from the range of procurements applicable to each zone, and potentially its relationship with contractors. The Shareholder of NMEC supports this view as do I.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proposals for the content of the Millennium Experience were received by ministers and the New Millennium Experience Company from the National Book Committee; and what response was given. [98824]

Janet Anderson: Clive Bradley of the National Book Committee wrote to the Minister without Portfolio on 27 March 1998 with proposals for how the importance of the written English language might be reflected in the Millennium Experience, and suggesting some authors who might play a role. The Minister passed the letter to NMEC for their consideration and asked Mr. Bradley to keep him informed of developments. No further correspondence can be traced.

Mr. Bradley also wrote to Jennie Page, NMEC Chief Executive, about the role of the book sector in millennium activities, and included proposals prepared by the Children's Book Group of Publishers Association linked to the theme and content of certain zones in the Dome. Ms Page explained that it was unlikely that the proposals would be taken forward in the precise format outlined, but that they would be fed into the creative process by those in the company with day-to-day editorial control of the relevant zones. Ms Page said that she was interested in exploring the future of books as part of the focus on literacy in the Learning zone and also the function of books as a tool to help us expand our minds in the Mind zone. She said that she would welcome any further views the National Book Committee might have on these issues and asked that they be addressed to the named zone editor who would coordinate NMEC's response. NMEC are unable to trace any further correspondence.

Digital Television

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many households have digital television in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* each other EU country. [100047]

Janet Anderson: By the end of September, BSkyB had signed up 1.8 million subscribers and ONdigital had signed up 411,000 subscribers in the UK. Information about the number of UK households which have digital television without subscribing to digital pay-tv services is not available. My Department has no readily available information on the numbers of digital television households in each EU country.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his plans for securing access to the Internet through digital television. [100136]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* As we take forward plans to switch analogue television transmissions over to digital, the Government will consider whether internet access might be guaranteed as part of a core package of services available to all viewers. We are also working with the industry on a public information campaign which will inform consumers about the benefits digital television has to offer; the services available, including internet access, and the equipment they will need.

Sydney Paralympics

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assistance his Department has provided to paraplegic athletes in their preparations for the Sydney Paralympics in 2000. [99843]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* In preparation for the Sydney 2000 Paralympic Games, the British Paralympic Association (BPA) has received a World Class Performance funding total of £455,030. Paralympic athletes—who include paraplegic competitors—will also benefit from the BPA's Core Preparation Programmes funding and should be in receipt of both personal subsistence and core programme capital if their sport has made a successful application for World Class Performance funding.

The funding support to date for each Paralympic sport, which includes paraplegic programmes, is as follows:

£

Sport	*Period of award*	*Combined performance and subsistence*
Athletics	1 May 1998–31 December 1999	2,171,522
Swimming	1 August 1997–30 September 2000	3,133,136
Wheelchair basketball	1 October 1997–31 May 2000	8,226,739
Wheelchair rugby	1 August 1999–31 July 2000	149,476
Table Tennis	1 December 1997–31 January 2000	185,858
Shooting	1 July 1999–30 November 1999	65,000
Powerlifting	1 July 1999–30 September 2000	112,566
Goalball	1 August 1999–31 July 2000	110,220

Sport England Lottery Fund

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the cities that have received funding from the Sports Council's lottery funding. [100442]

Kate Hoey: To date, the following cities have been awarded funding from the Sport England Lottery Fund.

£

City	*Total award*	*Total project cost*
Birmingham	11,850,738	16,478,416
Bradford	2,461,949	4,356,305
Bristol	4,317,967	6,272,568
Cambridge	9,012,993	14,717,658
Canterbury	3,836,475	5,032,395
Carlisle	1,531,910	2,549,444
Chester	1,211,912	2,054,664
Chichester	1,095,369	1,890,041
Coventry	46,412,826	67,927,735
Derby	1,193,414	3,218,349
Durham	620,170	1,013,347
Exeter	41,337	76,557
Gloucester	11,984,003	16,989,376
Greater London	226,754,885	484,433,107
Kingston upon Hull	218,656	339,016
Lancaster	5,051,541	11,383,754
Leeds	16,009,144	24,628,060
Leicester	1,637,226	3,835,822
Lincoln	467,821	603,044
Liverpool	17,660,223	26,914,325
Manchester	28,712,462	41,151,069
Newcastle upon Tyne	10,898,180	16,123,864
Norwich	14,567,220	17,657,920
Nottingham	22,721,667	39,260,006
Oxford	191,186	346,764
Peterborough	331,531	756,172
Plymouth	4,222,530	6,608,519
Portsmouth	12,414,360	22,381,600
Salford	966,049	1,353,583
Sheffield	15,748,753	21,389,041
Salisbury	677,088	984,223
Southampton	11,657,261	19,398,699
St. Albans	2,307,272	4,713,275
Stoke-on-Trent	8,753,332	10,973,800
Wakefield	5,974,631	7,721,503
Winchester	2,051,808	3,048,480
Worcester	353,658	744,968
York	768,486	1,098,222

CABINET OFFICE

Public Bodies

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies were in existence; what was their total annual running cost; how many employees they had; how many board members they had; and how many were in existence per sponsoring department in each of the last five years. [101066]

Mr. Stringer: The number of executive agencies in existence in each of the last five years is as follows:

Year	*Number of agencies as at 31 December*
1994	[1]104
1995	[1]111
1996	[1]131
1997	[2]142
1998	[2]142

[1] Figure includes HM Customs and Excise and Inland Revenue which are departments operating fully on Next Steps lines.

[2] Figure includes HM Customs and Excise, Inland Revenue, Crown Prosecution Service and Serious Fraud Office which are departments operating fully on Next Step lines.

The Next Steps Agencies in Government Review 1995 and 1996, and the Next Steps Report 1997 and 1998, provide details of the total annual running cost and the number of employees for each agency. The Next Steps Agencies in Government Review 1994 also provides details of the number of employees for each agency. Details of the total annual running cost for each agency in existence in 1994 is not centrally held. Executive agencies do not have board members.

The number of non-departmental public bodies in existence in each of the last five years is as follows.

Year	Number of NDPBs as at 1 April
1994	1,345
1995	1,227
1996	1,194
1997	1,128
1998	1,073

The Government's annual publication "Public Bodies" for these years provides the relevant details for each body. Copies of these publications are in the Library of the House. "Public Bodies 1999", which is due to be published later this month, will set out the figures for 1999.

The Department is at present implementing resource accounting. Values have been derived from audited accounting information. The first year of published resource accounts will be in respect of 1999–2000.

Executive Agencies

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office which executive agencies were *(a)* established and *(b)* abolished in (i) 1998 and (ii) 1999. [100623]

Mr. Stringer: A list of executive agencies which were established and abolished in 1998 and 1999 is set out as follows:

Agencies established in 1998

Debt Management Office

Defence Communication Services Agency

Forest Service

Maritime and Coastguard Agency[1]

Agencies Abolished in 1998

Security Facilities Executive Agency[2]

Agencies Established in 1999

Defence Aviation Repair Agency[3]

Defence Housing Executive

Defence Procurement Agency

Defence Storage and Distribution Agency[4]

Defence Transport and Movements Agency[5]

Agencies Abolished in 1999

Government Property Lawyers[6]

Departmental Estate

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what his estimate is of the current value of land and property held by the Cabinet Office in (i) Scotland and (ii) in total; [99727]

(2) what his estimate is of the current value of land and property *(a)* in Scotland and *(b)* in total held by each of the executive agencies within the responsibility of his Department; and if he will give the total value of assets held by these bodies. [99728]

Mr. Stringer: The total current value of the land and property held by the Cabinet Office, excluding executive agencies, is £69,715,000, none of which is in Scotland.

The current value of assets held by each executive agency within the responsibility of the Minister for the Cabinet Office in the requested categories is given in the table.

£

Executive agency	Value of assets: Land and property: In Scotland	Value of assets: Land and property: Total	Value of assets: Total assets
Civil Service College	0	8,003,000	9,567,000
Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA)	0	0	1,386,000
Government Car and Despatch Agency (GCDA)	0	0	2,560,000
Property Advisers to the Civil Estate (PACE)	699,000	1,683,000	18,667,000
The Buying Agency (TBA)	0	0	527,000
Central Office of Information (COI)	0	0	1,295,000
Total	699,000	9,686,000	34,002,000
PACE: Surplus land and property on the Civil Estate for disposal	2,200,000	52,699,000	—

[1] The Maritime and Coastguard Agency was launched as a result of the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions merging the Marine Safety Agency and the Coastguard Agency.

[2] On 14 May 1998, the then Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, Peter Kilfoyle, announced that the Security Facilities Executive Agency was no longer a viable organisation and that it would cease to be an executive agency from 1 July 1998.

[3] Defence Aviation Repair Agency was launched as an agency incorporating the RAF Maintenance Repair Organisation and Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation.

[4] Defence Storage and Distribution Agency was launched as an agency incorporating the majority of the Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency.

[5] Defence Transport and Movements Agency was launched as an agency incorporating the Defence Transport and Movements Executive.

[6] Following an evaluation of Government Property Lawyers (GPL) and a Prior Options Study, the Attorney-General concluded that against the background of a declining work load, the business of the GPL Agency had become non-viable and there was no longer a requirement to maintain a central conveyancing function in the public sector.

In addition to those agencies above which were abolished, in 1998 the Historic Royal Palaces Agency changed its status to that of a Non-Departmental Public Body. The Social Security Contributions Agency was incorporated in Inland Revenue in 1999 as an Executive Office (National Insurance Contributions Office).

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Organic Farming

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of whether the additional sum he has allocated for organic conversion will provide for all those farmers who have already begun the investments required for certification. [100792]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* Information provided by the organic sector bodies shows that the additional funding will be sufficient to provide for all farmers in England who had applied to them for registration by 4 October when the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) was suspended. Registration with an organic sector body is a condition of entry to the OFS. A number of farmers who applied for registration after 4 October will also have been able to submit applications for aid.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to promote meat products produced from animals raised to high standards of animal welfare. [100761]

Ms Quin: For species such as pigs, where animals produced in the UK are subject to higher statutory welfare standards, we have been encouraging retailers, caterers and public procurement authorities to source their supplies to British standards. These high welfare standards offer the domestic pig industry a strong marketing advantage. This is recognised by the Meat and Livestock Commission, the body responsible for promoting meat and meat products, which has made welfare an important part of its British Quality Standard for pigmeat scheme.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the enforcement regime for animal welfare legislation for farm animals. [100762]

Mr. Morley: Our approach to enforcement of the law on farm animal welfare is kept under regular review. The recent report on this subject from the Farm Animal Welfare Council and the secondment to MAFF of local authority enforcement officers contribute to this process.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received in the last six months suggesting changes in the legislation on animal welfare for farm animals. [100763]

Mr. Morley: I have received a number of representations in respect of farm animal welfare legislation, in particular in response to consultations on the draft Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations and on the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997.

Fishing Sectors

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his policy on vessels from the Republic of Ireland fishing in the British sector of area VIIa and south west of the Isle of Man. [100728]

Mr. Morley: The rights of vessels from the Republic of Ireland to fish within UK six to twelve mile territorial waters are set out in Annex I of EU Regulation 3760/92.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in respect of vessels from the Republic of Ireland fishing in area VIIa and South West of the Isle of Man, what (i) surveillance and (ii) boardings have been carried out in the last 12 months; what conservation measures must they comply with; to what extent they are obliged to comply with conservation measures introduced by the UK; how many vessels from the Republic of Ireland have licences to fish these waters; and how these licences were acquired. [100729]

Mr. Morley: From January to November 1999, the total number of Republic of Ireland (ROI) vessels sighted in Area VIIa (which includes the water South West of the Isle of Man) was 87. Five boardings were made. These vessels must comply with the relevant EU Technical conservation measures for the area, including, for example, minimum landing sizes. They are not obliged to comply with additional conservation requirements laid down in our domestic legislation. Details of the number of ROI vessels licensed to fish in Area VIIa and the terms on which these licenses were granted are held by the authorities in Dublin.

Floods (Bye Report)

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made by the Environment Agency in respect of its action plan following the Easter 1997 floods and the subsequent report of Sir Peter Bye. [100784]

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency produced an Action Plan for implementing the recommendations in the Independent Report on the Easter 1998 Floods, chaired by Sir Peter Bye.

The Chairman of the Environment Agency has provided me with a report of progress up to the end of September 1999. Copies have been placed in the House Libraries.

I am pleased to note that the Agency remains on course for completing the substantial work programme set out in the Action Plan to the agreed timetable.

Key developments since the Agency's last report, which covered the period to end of June 1999, are as follows.

Indicative flood plain maps for all watercourses with a catchment greater than 10 square kilometres in England and Wales have been delivered to over 450 local authorities.

Pilot work on flood warning awareness has been analysed and brought together to form the basis of the 1999 public awareness campaign which commenced on 18 October and to which I was pleased to lend my support. The first phase of the campaign focused on raising awareness of flood risk and self help measures to reduce flood damage. Future elements will repeat and reinforce these basic messages and introduce new and additional information to improve public understanding.

The head of the Agency's National Flood Warning Centre has been recruited and the programme is in place for the centre to be operational by the end of the year.

The results of a review of the Agency's internal management have been translated into a project plan which will see the core flood defence roles and responsibilities harmonised across the Agency by the end of December 1999, with full implementation by April 2000.

Work continues in other important areas such as the project to implement the operational changes to the colour coded flood warning messages by September 2000.

The Agency continues to work with local authorities in inspecting and recording the condition of all flood defences. Details of defences owned and/or operated by the Agency and local authorities are being collated. However, one area of uncertainty is the inspection of flood defences owned and/or operated by third parties. The question of how to identify such defences, and the scale of the inspection exercise that will be required, is currently being considered by the Agency in partnership with other operating authorities.

The Agency continues to make good progress in implementing the Easter Floods Report and I will ensure that the House is updated on future progress.

Farmers (Diversification)

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he is taking to assist farmers to diversify their businesses. [100275]

Mr. Morley: Funding to encourage a wide range of agricultural activities, including farm diversification, is available in the six areas designated under the English Objective 5b Structural Fund Programmes which are due to close on 31 December 1999. The European Council Rural Development Regulation (1257/1999), which applies from 2000, enables member states to support projects to encourage diversification of agricultural activities, among other things. A decision on the implementation of the Regulation will be made shortly.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with *(a)* the Treasury and *(b)* the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions about securing an 80 per cent. discount from climate change levy rates for protected horticulture. [100459]

Ms Quin: We have discussed the potential impact of the levy on protected horticulture with both Departments.

Animal Feed

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what evidence he has received as to whether transgenic plant DNA is broken down in commercial processing and treatments in animal feed. [100167]

Ms Quin: Ministry-funded work has confirmed that DNA is degraded during the processing of most animal feed materials. For example, extracting oil from oilseeds caused complete degradation of the DNA in the by-products. This work, and a further current study, has concerned commercially available feed ingredients as an indicator of what would happen to transgenic plant material.

Post Offices

Mr. Webb: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the principal activities of his Department and its agencies which provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices and *(b)* other post offices; if he will assess whether the level of business generated in each case is likely to increase or decrease over the next five years; and which new areas of business for post offices are likely to be developed by his Department and its agencies over the same period. [99559]

Mr. Morley: My Department and its agencies do not have activities or services which provide business for post offices, and currently no specific areas of business are foreseen, but the targets for electronic delivery of services (50 per cent. by 2005 and 100 per cent. by 2008) set out in the Modernising Government White Paper represent a real opportunity for additional business for the Post Office network across all public services delivered by central Government.

Beef Exports

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimates his Department has made of the losses incurred by British farmers as a result of French and German import restrictions on British beef since 1 August. [98750]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 22 November 1999]:* It has not been possible to sell British beef in France or Germany since March 1996, and inevitably it will take time to build up sales when these countries lift their import restrictions. Any estimate of sales lost since 1 August would be entirely speculative.

Brixham Port

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on how many occasions he has paid a visit to Brixham in South Devon since May 1997; and if he will visit the fishing port before 2000 to discuss with local fishermen their quota problems in Area VII. [100800]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 1 December 1999]:* Since 1997, I have had frequent discussions with fishermen, including those from the South West, on a wide range of matters. I shall be visiting Brixham on 6 December 1999.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 6 December 1999

NORTHERN IRELAND

Farming

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will establish an inter-departmental task force on problems facing the farming industry in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [100057]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Industry and Universities

Mr. Hume: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what assessment he has made of the correlation between the geographical locations of industry and of universities; [100644]

(2) how many students, normally domiciled in Northern Ireland, are enrolled in full-time first degree university courses; and how many full-time first degree places are available in Northern Ireland. [100660]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Solicitor-General how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100154]

The Solicitor-General: The Law Officers' Departments comprising the Treasury Solicitor's Department, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office, have let no research contracts since May 1997.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Aid Projects

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the aid projects supported by her Department in *(a)* Morocco and *(b)* Ghana, in each of the last five years, indicating those which also received ECGD assistance. [100248]

Clare Short: The following lists all projects undertaken in the last five financial years at costs greater than £1 million.

Country	*Project/programme title*	*Total commitment*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*Expenditure for last five years*
Ghana	ATP Kotoka Airport Rehab.	8,585	1	—	—	—	—	1
Ghana	Kumasi Waste Disposal	1,085	13	0	—	—	—	13
Ghana	Junior Secondary Schools	2,436	13	—	—	—	—	13
Ghana	Monitoring (Kotoka Rehab.)	1,278	9	16	—	—	—	25
Ghana	Kotoka Rehab. TC Services	1,595	183	—	—	—	—	183
Ghana	Civil Service Reform Project	2,986	151	37	6	2	11	208
Ghana	Cocoa Research (CRIG)	3,841	163	118	—	—	—	281
Ghana	Social Dimensions of Adj	1,156	91	108	101	20	4	324
Ghana	Village Hand Dug Wells	1,020	151	—	115	103	—	368
Ghana	Accra Waste Project	1,700	—	6	13	148	247	415
Ghana	Education Sector Support	51,800	—	—	—	—	445	445
Ghana	Power V ATP	7,281	391	125	—	—	—	516
Ghana	Management of Vertisols	1,528	325	329	93	35	6	776
Ghana	WSIP Water Sector Improvement Sector	4,065	—	—	—	245	570	815
Ghana	Literacy and Functional Skills project	936	144	202	328	163	—	837
Ghana	Contraceptive Procurement for National Planning	1,035	—	1,033	2	—	—	1,035
Ghana	SE Districts Water	9,830	—	41	2,931	1,423	743	5,138
Ghana	Wenchi Farming Systems Development and Training	1,528	283	231	329	267	168	1,279
Ghana	Two regions water supply	1,620	73	95	345	438	398	1,349
Ghana	Value Added Tax Implementation	1,870	750	303	4	41	375	1,472
Ghana	Small Enterprise Dev. Project	2,400	305	225	393	366	305	1,595
Ghana	Public Enterprise Reform	2,103	315	250	471	444	192	1,672
Ghana	UNICEF—Vaccines and Drugs	1,761	—	—	1,750	11	—	1,761

Country	Project/programme title	Total commitment	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	Expenditure for last five years
Ghana	Forest Inventory and Management Project	4,980	772	855	168	14	2	1,810
Ghana	CSPIP Phase Two	5,000	—	—	129	661	1,147	1,937
Ghana	Forest Sector Development	2,574	—	0	676	765	692	2,133
Ghana	Support to Teacher Education Project (STEP)	3,200	1,127	707	619	164	2	2,621
Ghana	NVTI Project—ATP	3,500	—	—	2,303	1,143	39	3,485
Ghana	Bridges for Feeder Roads	7,640	—	—	—	580	3,206	3,786
Ghana	Preparation Costs HSIP	4,200	—	—	54	941	3,199	4,194
Ghana	SE Districts Water	4,830	—	—	2,875	1,249	479	4,603
Ghana	Equipment	5,100	2,021	2,391	632	1	—	5,042
Ghana	Health Sector Aid	6,415	761	1,234	2,508	735	36	5,273
Ghana	Accra Waste Project	6,100	—	—	—	3,824	2,031	5,855
Ghana	Support to Ministry of Health's 5 Year Programme of Work	23,600	—	—	—	1,061	5,094	6,155
Ghana	Programme Aid 1998	20,050	—	—	—	—	20,036	20,036
Morocco	Morocco Gas Turbines	7,276	—	—	—	6	—	6
Morocco	Tetouan Gas Turbines Project	10,926	1,313	122	7	—	—	1,442

Those projects which also received ECGD support were:

Ghana: South East Districts (Sogakope) Water Project—completed

Ghana: NVTI Vocational Training—completed

Ghana: Accra Waste—2001 completion

Morocco: Tetouan Gas Turbines Project—completed

European Aid (Central America)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the *(a)* nature and *(b)* destination of the 250 million euros aid voted in the European Council for reconstruction and rehabilitation in Central America. [101109]

Clare Short: Following the European Council's approval of 250 million euros in post-Mitch reconstruction aid for Central America in May 1999, the European Commission developed a programme of reconstruction, which was agreed by member states in November. The programme will provide Honduras (119 million euros), Nicaragua (84 million euros), El Salvador (28.5 million euros) and Guatemala (18.5 million euros) in three areas:

reinstating, improving and extending infrastructure and equipment in the education, public health, environmental sanitation and housing sectors;

strengthening educational, public health and sanitation services, including the management capacity of the relevant government institutions, in order to improve efficiency, quality and access, for the most vulnerable sections of the population;

strengthening local government and civil society by providing support for the drafting and implementation of rehabilitation and development plans and for the preparation of a framework for risk prevention and to lessen the impact of this type of natural disaster.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many research contracts have been let by her Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100162]

Clare Short: The number of research contracts let since May 1997 is very large, running into hundreds. Recording them and listing the value of each would involve disproportionate cost. The Department for International Development's (DFID) net expenditure on research was estimated at £112 million in 1997–98 and £116 million in 1998–99.

Source:

SET Statistics 1999, published by the Office of Science and Technology

The standard contracts for research projects funded by DFID make no provision for departmental veto over publication, for control over the date of publication. Nor do they contain any requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Portcullis House

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee if he will make it his policy to prohibit the provision of accommodation to civil servants at Portcullis House. [99863]

Sir Sydney Chapman *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* In accordance with the Resolution of the House when it approved the brief for the project, Portcullis House will provide office accommodation for 210 hon. Members and for a similar number of their staff. The question of offering any of the space to Government Departments for use by civil servants does not arise.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what categories of persons it is proposed will be allocated accommodation at Portcullis House. [99883]

Sir Sydney Chapman *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* The office space in Portcullis House will be occupied by 210 hon. Members and their staff. The only

exceptions are two offices to be used by the Clerks Department to provide support services for Select Committees using the adjacent Select Committee rooms, and by the office services and maintenance management staff responsible for the building.

Parliamentary Estate (Expenditure)

Mr. Baker: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, how much has been spent on works within the Parliamentary Estate since 1 May 1997; what further sums are anticipated to be spent; and if he will list the amounts broken down by project, indicating the original estimated budget per project. [100504]

Mr. Kirkwood *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* Expenditure against the Works Votes of both Houses including rents, rates, fuel and overheads but excluding Portcullis House has been as follows:

£

Year	*Voted sums*	*Outturn*
1997–98	49,017,000	[1]48,852,000
1998–99	51,013,000	50,002,000
1999–2000 (forecast expenditure)	55,088,000	[2]53,652,000
2000–01 (forecast expenditure)	[3]57,876,000	[3]57,876,000

[1] Excluding legal fees
[2] Forecast
[3] Estimate

These sums covered 510 projects in 1997–98 and 419 projects in 1998–99. The number of projects planned for 1999–2000 is 422. The larger projects during this period were:

£

Project description	*Original estimate*	*Outturn*
Norman Shaw North PDVN Lower Floors	1,150,000	1,180,333
Norman Shaw North PDVN Upper Floors	1,654,600	1,854,600
Refreshment Department Members and Strangers Cafeteria	7,042,800	6,776,428
Refreshment Department Stores and Changing Rooms	9,070,000	8,974,800
Fire Compartmentation 1997–98	1,400,000	1,376,844
Fire Compartmentation 1998–99	1,300,000	1,173,447
Fire Compartmentation 1999–2000	1,250,000	1,250,000
Basement Fire Alarm	2,300,000	2,299,553
PDVN Phase 3 1997–98	5,000,000	5,001,857
PDVN Phase 4 1998–99	5,120,000	5,975,000
PDVN Phase 5 1999–2000	7,000,000	6,625,565
Committee Room Refurbishment Phase I	861,668	872,600
Committee Room Refurbishment Phase II	1,343,000	1,122,339
Royal Gallery Roof Overhaul	4,125,660	3,783,021

For Portcullis House the total expenditure to April 1999 was £149 million. The remaining forecast expenditure and contingency is £86 million, so the project is expected to be completed at least £15 million below budget.

DEFENCE

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what motor mileage allowance rates his Department offers to *(a)* ministers and *(b)* civil servants using their own vehicles for official business; and what has been the cost of each in each of the last five years. [98722]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Ministers and MOD civilians are paid the same Motor Mileage Rates if they use their private vehicles for official duty. Reimbursement for motor mileage for official travel in private vehicles is paid at different levels. The higher (Standard) rate is restricted to journeys that would be impracticable by public transport, taking into account the overall cost to the Department. It reflects the full cost of travel by car. The lower (Public Transport) rate is set at a level which reflects the average cost of travel by public transport and is paid for all other official travel by car.

The rates applicable in the current tax year are as follows:

Standard rates of motor mileage allowance

Pence per mile

Car engine capacity	*Up to 4,000*	*Over 4,000*
Up to 1000cc	28	17
1001cc-1500cc	35	20
1501cc-2000cc	45	25
2001cc and over	63	36
Public transport rate of motor mileage allowance		
All cars		26.5

Details of Motor Mileage Allowance payments to Ministers are not held separately from those paid to MOD civilians and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The total costs of Motor Mileage Allowance claims paid to MOD civilians, including Ministers, are:

£

Financial year	*Actual cost*
1994–95	11,500,000
1995–96	12,200,000
1996–97	12,700,000
1997–98	12,100,000
1998–99	11,800,000

Kapton Insulation

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what advice he has received about the safety of Kapton wiring in military aircraft; and what actions he has taken. [100924]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 197W.

Gurkhas

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for increasing the number of Gurkhas serving in the UK armed forces. [101334]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen), on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 191W.

Depleted Uranium Munitions (Yugoslavia)

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* advice and *(b)* help is given to civilians in Yugoslavia who might have been exposed to contamination by the radioactive dust left by depleted uranium munitions. [99719]

Mr. Spellar: We are not aware of any civilians in Yugoslavia who might have been exposed to contamination by the radioactive dust left by depleted uranium munitions.

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what protection and advice is provided for British ordnance officers engaged in dealing with depleted uranium munitions in Yugoslavia. [99718]

Mr. Spellar: No British personnel are currently engaged in dealing with depleted uranium munitions in Yugoslavia. However, as a precaution, Service personnel are given appropriate guidance during Kosovo pre-deployment training.

Civilian Posts

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many posts have been civilianised in the Directorate of Naval Resources during the last 12 months. [100290]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Arising from the reorganisation of the Central Staff, the Directorate of Naval Resources and Plans was formed on 2 August 1999 comprising elements of the Directorate of Resources and Programmes (Navy), staffed by 17 civilian personnel, and the Directorate of Navy Plans, staffed by 18 military and four civilian personnel. The new Directorate has 20 staff, 11 military and nine civilian personnel overall. One military post was civilianised as the new organisation was formed.

Defence Estates Agency

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many staff are employed at the Defence Estates Agency HQ at Sutton Coldfield. [100289]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The number of Defence Estates staff employed at Sutton Coldfield as of 1 December 1999 is 392, consisting of 162 Head Office staff and 230 Central Business Unit staff.

Project Capital

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the value of work put out to consultants working on Project Capital in each of the last three years. [100285]

Mr. Spellar: PricewaterhouseCoopers were appointed the Project Capital Accounting System Integrators in 1996. As such, they act as project managers, systems developers, implementers and advisers.

Total payments made on these activities over the last three years were as follows:

	£
1996–97	10,725,000
1997–98	28,242,000
1998–99	40,279,000

Income Support

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence under what circumstances service men in HM forces may receive Income Support. [100336]

Mr. Spellar: Service personnel are eligible to receive social security benefits paid by the DSS on the same basis as civilians. It is, however, unlikely that any service personnel would be eligible for Income Support, given the qualifying criterion requiring a claimant to be working for less than 16 hours per week.

Type-45 Destroyers

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the first vessel of the Type-45 destroyer programme will be delivered; and when he expects the last one to be completed. [100757]

Mr. Kilfoyle: On current plans, the first Type-45 destroyer will enter into service with the Royal Navy in 2007 and we expect that the last will enter service in 2014.

Kosovo

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many, and what kind of, strike aircraft were redirected from combat air patrols to offensive operations as a result of the deployment of the HMS Invincible Task Group to the Kosovo theatre of operations. [98564]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* The Sea Harriers based aboard HMS Invincible conducted 102 combat air patrols. As a result, it was possible for multi-role aircraft which might otherwise have been tasked with such duties to be switched to alternative missions. Given the size and complexity of the operation, however, it is not possible to quantify precisely how many aircraft and planned missions were directly affected in this way.

St. Malo Declaration

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the discussions taking place, and the countries concerned, regarding the St. Malo declaration. [100835]

Mr. Hoon: At St. Malo in December 1998, the UK and France launched a major initiative aimed at building European security and defence. In conjunction with the member states of the European Union, NATO and the Western European Union, we are continuing to make good progress both in defining the improvements in capabilities needed and the necessary consultation and decision-making arrangements for responding to crises. The UK and France made a joint declaration on 25 November calling for a further decisive step to be taken at the Helsinki European Council on 10–11 December.

RAF Menwith Hill

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when a minister from his Department last visited RAF Menwith Hill. [101132]

Mr. Spellar: Since 1 May 1997, no Minister of this Department has visited RAF Menwith Hill.

Common Foreign and Security Policy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures are under way through the Common Foreign and Security Policy consequential to the Cologne Summit to *(a)* modify and *(b)* unify European capabilities in (i) intelligence, (ii) strategic transport, (iii) command and control and (iv) defence industries; and if he will make a statement. [100999]

Mr. Hoon: We are committed to strengthening Europe's military capabilities such that European nations are able to assemble, deploy rapidly and sustain the right mix of armed forces for specific NATO or EU-led operations.

We believe that European nations, co-operating together, should be able to undertake the most demanding crisis management operations up to Corps level. At the UK/French Summit in November 1999, we called on European member states to commit themselves to this goal at the Helsinki European Council. Additionally, we called for capability goals to be set and established in the fields of command and control, intelligence and strategic lift, and announced some bilateral measures to enhance our capabilities in these areas.

We also reaffirmed our conviction that strengthened European defence capabilities need to be supported by a strong and competitive European defence industry and technology.

Further discussions on these issues will be held by the EU Heads of State and Government at the European Council in Helsinki on 10–11 December.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future membership and remit of the *(a)* political and security and *(b)* military committees, established at the Cologne summit. [101001]

Mr. Hoon: At the Cologne European Council, Heads of State and Government approved a report by the German Presidency which noted that, to support defence decision making, the EU might require a Political and Security Committee and a Military Committee.

The membership and role of these bodies will be discussed by the EU Heads of State and Government at the European Council in Helsinki on 10–11 December.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the establishment of an EU (i) situation centre, (ii) satellite centre and (iii) Institute for Security Studies, with reference to *(a)* function, *(b)* budget and *(c)* security clearance rating. [101002]

Mr. Hoon: At the Cologne European Council, Heads of State and Government approved a report by the German Presidency which noted that, to support defence decision making, the EU might require a situation centre, a satellite centre and an Institute for Security Studies.

Such bodies already exist under the auspices of the WEU. The future of these bodies, and of the relationship between the WEU and EU, will be further discussed by the EU Heads of State and Government at the European Council in Helsinki, on 10–11 December, and over the coming months.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the development of a central intelligence and analysis agency for the EU consequential to the Cologne Summit. [101105]

Mr. Hoon: We are committed to strengthening Europe's military capabilities so that European nations are able to assemble, deploy rapidly and sustain the right mix of armed forces for specific NATO or EU-led operations.

The EU must be able to draw on intelligence and analysis capabilities in order to undertake a crisis management operation. We are discussing with our Allies and Partners, both in NATO and in the European Union, the best way of achieving this.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the appropriate decision-making bodies referred to in section 2 of the Cologne Presidency report on Strengthening of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. [101000]

Mr. Hoon: The decision-making bodies referred to in section 2 of the Cologne Presidency Report are detailed in section 3 of the same Report.

EU Rapid Reaction Force

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which countries have agreed to contribute to the European Union Rapid Reaction Force; and what each nation will make available in terms of *(a)* personnel, *(b)* logistics, *(c)* ships, *(d)* aircraft, *(e)* artillery, *(f)* main battle tanks, *(g)* other armoured vehicles and *(h)* intelligence and surveillance capability. [101101]

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the UK units for tagged service within an EU framework, consequential to the Cologne Summit. [101104]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* At the recent UK/French Summit, we called on EU member states to commit themselves to being able to undertake, co-operating together, crisis management operations up to Corps level. In particular, this will mean developing the capabilities of existing national forces, from which such a deployment could be drawn case-by-case for specific NATO or EU operations. We are not creating a standing European Rapid Reaction Force.

This proposal will be discussed by EU Heads of State and Government at the European Council in Helsinki on 10–11 December. EU member states have not identified any national contributions that might be made available for EU-led operations if they agree this aim.

HMS Ocean

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what problems have been identified with the cooking facilities and supply of hot water on HMS Ocean. [100879]

Mr. Spellar: No significant problems have been identified with the cooking facilities or supply of hot water on HMS Ocean.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects HMS Ocean to be in full working order; and if he will make a statement. [100878]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Ocean has been in operational service since 12 March 1999. While the ship has experienced some equipment difficulties, this is not unexpected in the early period of operational life. The Department, the shipbuilder and the equipment manufacturers are working together to improve reliability. This ship has met her busy operational programme.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of repairs and alterations to HMS Ocean carried out since she was handed over to his Department. [100880]

Mr. Spellar: This information is not readily available and I will write to the hon. Member. A copy of my reply will be placed in the Library of the House.

Naval Training Establishments

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has for the future of *(a)* HMS Collingwood, *(b)* HMS Centurion, *(c)* HMS Dryad and *(d)* HMS Sultan; and if he will make a statement. [100876]

Mr. Spellar: My Department has no plans which might affect HMS Collingwood, HMS Dryad, HMS Sultan and the Centurion site in the immediate future. With specific regard to Collingwood, Dryad and Sultan, these Naval training establishments form part of the Naval Recruiting and Training Agency, whose Chief Executive is under a constant remit to review his estate usage to ensure efficiency targets are achieved. Accordingly, the Chief Executive has commissioned an internal strategic review to develop a number of innovative, imaginative, and far reaching options for the future of naval training and to propose the size and shape of the Agency for the future. In Portsmouth, HMS Collingwood, HMS Sultan, HMS Dryad and HMS Excellent are all being considered as part of this review.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much money has been spent in each of the last three years on *(a)* HMS Collingwood, *(b)* HMS Centurion, *(c)* HMS Dryad and *(d)* HMS Sultan; and if he will make a statement. [100877]

Mr. Spellar: The amount of money spent on HMS Dryad, HMS Collingwood and HMS Sultan over the last three years is as follows:

£ million

	Financial Year 1996–97	*Financial Year 1997–98*	*Financial Year 1998–99*
HMS Collingwood	27.395	27.472	26.978
HMS Dryad	23.402	22.255	23.632
HMS Sultan	40.350	35.404	36.460

These figures are the final cash outturn figures and include the cost of maintaining the buildings and equipment, major capital works (detailed separately), Service manpower costs and civilian manpower costs.

The following sums were spent on major capital works:

£ million

	Financial Year 1996–97	*Financial Year 1997–98*	*Financial Year 1998–99*
HMS Collingwood	0.183	0.614	1.235
HMS Dryad	1.063	0.578	0.581
HMS Sultan	2.259	0.448	0.122

Centurion Building was transferred under a full repairing and insuring lease on 1 January 1998 to Electronic Data Systems (EDS) Defence Limited, as part of a PFI contract. The MOD has not incurred any direct costs arising from maintenance or alterations to this building since that time.

TAVR (Solihull)

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will report progress on the securing of new premises for the sea, army and air cadets who parade at the TAVR centre in Haslucks Green Road in Shirley, Solihull. [101062]

Mr. Spellar: An alternative site nearby has been identified for the Army Cadet Force, Air Training Corps and Sea Cadet Corps detachments currently based at the Territorial Army Centre, Haslucks Green Road, Shirley. A joint facility will be constructed on this site for the Army Cadet Force and the Air Training Corps and a separate facility on the same site will be constructed for the Sea Cadet Corps. It is hoped that the new accommodation for the cadets will be completed by April 2001, and I can confirm that all three units will continue to parade at their present location until then. The Secretary of the West Midlands Reserve Forces and Cadets Association will continue to keep the hon. Member informed of progress on this matter.

RAF Chinook Crash

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the continuing involvement of the Air Accident Investigation Branch in the 1994 RAF Chinook crash on the Mull of Kintyre. [101195]

Mr. Spellar: The Air Accidents Investigation Branch are available for consultation by my officials as the need arises.

Air-to-air Missile Contract

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the contract for the Beyond Visual Range Air-to-air Missile; [101331]

(2) what account he has taken of the use and sales abroad of the Eurofighter in determining his decision on supplying the contract for the Beyond Visual Range Air-to-air Missile. [101332]

Mr. Hoon: We are currently evaluating the Best and Final Offers we have received in response to the BVRAAM competition. The evaluation will take fully into account the implications for potential sales of Eurofighter of the different proposals received, together with all other relevant factors such as missile performance, cost, industrial impact and overall value for money.

US Army Chinook

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library reports he has received from the United States authorities relating to the US Army Chinook CH-47 barrel roll incident in 1998. [101400]

Mr. Spellar: No. The information that we received from the US Army Authorities about the incident was provided in confidence. I am therefore withholding it under Exemption 1c (information received in confidence from foreign governments) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Salisbury Plain

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he or his officials have had with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about the extension of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site boundaries into the Salisbury Plain training area, including Robin Hood's Ball. [101399]

Mr. Kilfoyle: My officials have not had direct discussions with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on the proposed extension of the World Heritage Site (WHS). However members of Defence Estate, Land Command and DCMS staff sit on various working groups run by English Heritage connected with the Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS) Management and Master Plans. A number of these groups have considered the boundaries of the World Heritage Site.

HMS Glasgow

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how long HMS Glasgow will continue with its current deployment as part of the UN mission in East Timor; [101297]

(2) what role HMS Glasgow and her crew have played in the humanitarian effort in East Timor. [101296]

Mr. Hoon: HMS Glasgow sailed to East Timor on 18 September as part of the combined Task Group, and carried-out escort duties in the initial stages of the INTERFET deployment. She landed a working party to assist the Gurkhas with humanitarian aid tasks on 25 September. The ship's medical company also came ashore to assist in the setting up of a clinic. HMS Glasgow left East Timor on 30 September, and arrived home in Portsmouth on 10 November.

MOD Police

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the average number of sickness hours, per officer, per month, among MOD police as a whole in each of the last 12 months. [101639]

Mr. Spellar: The average number of sickness hours per Ministry of Defence police per officer per month is shown in the following table:

Month	*Hours*
November 1998	10.1
December 1998	9.8
January 1999	10.4
February 1999	9.6
March 1999	10.1
April 1999	8.6
May 1999	8.5
June 1999	9.7
July 1999	10.0
August 1999	10.0
September 1999	10.2
October 1999	10.8

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the average length of employment at AWE Aldermaston of MOD police officers whose service there ended in the last five years. [101640]

Mr. Spellar: This information is held in files that have been archived and so I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House when it is available.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of MOD police at Aldermaston left their job *(a)* by retirement with immediate pension rights, *(b)* voluntarily, but without immediate pension rights and *(c)* compulsorily during (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999. [101641]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested is shown in the table:

	1997	*1998*	*1999*
Percentage of officers that left their job with immediate pension rights	2.97	3.56	3.38
Percentage of officers that left their job voluntarily but without immediate pension rights	0	1.98	1.35
Percentage of officers that left compulsorily	0	0	0

The figures do not include officers that were posted away from AWE Aldermaston to other MOD police stations.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the level of Meat Hygiene Service charges. [101638]

Mr. Nick Brown: On 1 December, the Government announced that Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) hygiene inspection charges for the whole of 1999–2000 would be held at the levels set for 1998–99. This will result in a

saving to the meat industry of some £7 million in charges in 1999–2000. The Government have also given a commitment that the rates of MHS hygiene inspection charges in 2000–02 should not rise by more than the level of inflation above the levels charged in 1999–2000.

This will bring benefits across the livestock industry and demonstrates the Government's commitment to helping the sector through its present difficulties.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100148]

Ms Quin: The number of research projects placed since May 1997 is 1,317. The total value of these projects is approximately £254 million. Detailed information is being placed in the Libraries of both Houses. Written agreements, contracts or memoranda of understanding cover all projects. The Department's policy is to encourage its contractors to make the results of research available to the public, to industry, and the wider research community, including through peer-reviewed scientific papers and a range of other routes. The Ministry's approach is that information should be released, save where disclosure would not be in the public interest. We publish details of MAFF-sponsored R & D projects on our website (www.maff.gov.uk) and copies of scientific reports are normally available on request. Overall policy on the release of Government information is set out in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. There is no requirement that contractors incorporate departmental amendments to their research results though final reports are sometimes discussed with contractors as necessary.

BSE

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many cases of BSE have been confirmed in each of the last 12 months *(a)* in each of the Government office regions and *(b)* in total. [99845]

Ms Quin: The following table gives figures for confirmed BSE cases by month of confirmation for the last 12 months for the State Veterinary Service (SVS) regions in England together with the regional totals. For Scotland and Wales, figures are given to the end of June 1999. From 1 July 1999, provision of figures for those countries became the responsibility of the devolved administrations, so no further details or totals can be supplied.

The total number of BSE cases confirmed in Great Britain for the year ended 31 October 1999 was 3,274.

It must be noted that expressing cases by month of confirmation does not reflect the occurrence of disease at that particular time. The interval between slaughter of the suspect and confirmation of the disease may be six to eight weeks for routine cases, but could be considerably longer in cases where additional tests or further on-farm investigations are requested.

The high number of confirmed cases in the first five months of 1999 is a consequence of accelerated diagnosis in order to provide material for an EU research project. Many of these would have been confirmed in April or May under normal procedures.

Number of BSE cases confirmed in each region by month of confirmation from November 1998 to October 1999

Month	*East*	*West*	*North*	*Scotland*	*Wales*
1998					
November	127	237	175	11	44
December	47	109	58	6	13
1999					
January	75	125	91	15	21
February	78	124	76	4	15
March	108	160	112	7	31
April	49	81	64	6	15
May	58	91	40	3	17
June	43	82	48	3	15
July	48	66	52	—	—
August	35	80	45	—	—
September	50	97	63	—	—
October	61	77	54	—	—
Total	779	1,329	878	—	—

Meat Labelling

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make representations to the European Commission calling for French and Belgian beef imports to be labelled with the country of origin as a guide to consumers. [99753]

Ms Quin: The European Commission has recently put forward proposals for an EU scheme for compulsory origin labelling of beef. These are under discussion with European partners. In principle, compulsory labelling of beef will benefit consumers but will have a cost implication for the supply chain. The Government will consider the UK position on the proposals in the light of negotiations, but in principle we see advantages in labelling.

GM Varieties

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what plans he has to use his powers to revoke any national list entries in respect of GM varieties as a result of the farm-scale GM evaluations; [99986]

(2) what estimate he has made of the compensatory payments to which maintainers of GM varieties on the national list may be entitled upon revocation of their listing after farm-scale evaluations. [99987]

Ms Quin: There are no genetically modified plant varieties on the UK National List at present, so the questions do not arise.

Food Surpluses

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the level of food surpluses in storage in each member state of the European Union, broken down by country and quantity involved. [100836]

Ms Quin: The latest figures where available, for intervention stocks for each member state, are broken down as follows (figures quoted in tonnes unless otherwise stated):

	Cereals 21.11.1999	*Beef 31.7.1999*	*SMP 25.11.1999*	*Butter 25.11.1999*	*Olive Oil 11.10.1999*	*Wine (hectolitres) 31.10.1999*
Belgium	131,924	147	6,392	2,000	—	—
Denmark	255,035	1,023	—	—	—	—
Germany	6,059,985	117,727	35,849	7,953	—	—
Greece	—	—	—	—	11,974	3,994
Spain	703,246	17,126	1,150	11,781	10,876	524,799
Ireland	35,551	26,690	63,751	13,908	—	—
France	4,487,758	46,811	2,276	—	—	433,106
Italy	15,998	6,407	—	3,200	2,591	957,482
Luxembourg	5,275	—	—	—	—	—
Netherlands	—	836	10,913	—	—	—
Austria	16,623	4,024	—	—	—	—
Portugal	—	434	—	3,364	—	48,000
Finland	41,297	—	2,212	1,368	—	—
Sweden	250,352	—	11,643	—	—	—
UK	395,502	50,154	64,765	6,870	—	—
Totals	12,398,546	271,377	199,401	50,444	25,441	1,967,381

French Turkeys

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if a Government health warning will be issued on the risk of E. Coli and salmonella poisoning from eating French turkeys without adequate precautions. [101078]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The risk of food poisoning from poultry can be avoided by observing the simple rules of food hygiene, in accordance with on-going Government advice. We have no evidence to indicate that turkeys from France pose any greater risk than turkeys from elsewhere.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what quantity of turkey meat has been imported from France in each of the past three years; and what is the estimate for 1999. [101075]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* Official Overseas Trade Statistics show that UK imports of turkey carcase meat, offal and meat and offal preparations from France during 1996–98 and January to August 1999 were as shown in the table.

Tonnes

Turkey imports from France	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*[1]1999*
Carcase meat (whole birds and cuts)	27,370	25,453	19,175	7,766
Meat and offal preparations	384	747	746	407
Offal	161	389	196	120
Total	27,915	26,588	20,117	8,293

[1] January-August

It is not possible to make an accurate forecast of 1999 imports, since the September to December period accounts for a major, but not constant, proportion of annual imports (over 60 per cent. in 1998). However, overall turkey imports from France during January to August 1999 were nearly 5 per cent. higher than for the same period in 1998.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what checks are made on the welfare standards of turkeys imported from France. [101077]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* It is for the French authorities to check the welfare standards under which turkeys are reared in France against any relevant standards set by French law. The welfare of turkeys and all animals during transport is protected by the requirements of Council Directive 91/628/EEC as amended by Council Directive 95/29/EEC. This Directive is implemented in Great Britain by the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 and enforced by local authorities.

Pig Farmers

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with the EU on measures to offer price or income support to British pig farmers. [101068]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* None, as direct payments and similar supports to producers are not part of the CAP pigmeat regime. However, we have pressed the European Commission to reopen the aids to private storage of pigmeat scheme and to reinstate special refunds on exports of fresh and frozen pig carcases and cuts to Russia. Officials in the Department have also discussed with the European Commission the costs faced by British pig producers because of BSE and the possibility of introducing a pig offal disposal scheme.

Zinc Bacitracin

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his assessment of the effect of

the suspension of the use of zinc bacitracin in animal feed on the incidence of necrotic enteritis and choloangiohepatitis in poultry. [98445]

Ms Quin: There are three authorised antimicrobial growth promoters still available for use in poultry production, with similar effects on the gut flora of poultry to that of bacitracin. Necrotic enteritis and choloangiohepatitis are not notifiable diseases and therefore statistics on their incidence cannot be provided.

Farm-based Tourism

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what studies he has *(a)* initiated and *(b)* received concerning the obstacles to developing farm-based tourism; what action he is taking as a result of these studies; and what funds are available to him to support such action. [100271]

Mr. Morley: No such studies have been initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The Government's Tourism Strategy "Tomorrow's Tourism", launched earlier this year, recognises tourism's role in maintaining the viability of farm businesses. The European Council Rural Development Regulation (1257/1999), which applies from 2000, enables member states to support projects to encourage tourist and craft activities, among other things. A decision on the implementation of the Regulation will be made shortly. Schemes to provide advice and support for those farmers contemplating farm-based tourism have been supported through Objective 5b Schemes. These close at the end of the year.

PRIME MINISTER

Minister for Youth

Mr. Wood: To ask the Prime Minister if the Government will appoint a Minister for Youth. [99468]

The Prime Minister: While I keep ministerial responsibilities under regular review, I have no current plans to do so. Ministers in several Departments have responsibilities in this area, and work together on cross-departmental policies for young people.

Royal Gifts

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the gifts received by Her Majesty the Queen and registered as Government property since 1969. [100327]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 23 January 1998, *Official Report*, column 722W.

Representation of the People Bill

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister if the Home Office has been given an exemption from his instruction to all Departments to undertake and publish a regulatory impact study of the financial and other effects of all proposed Government legislation, with particular reference to the Representation of the People Bill. [100676]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* No. A regulatory impact statement relating to the Representation of the People Bill was placed in the Library on 18 November to coincide with the Bill's introduction.

Gold Reserves

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer of 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 613–14, who gave the advice to him and to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to which he referred and which led them to instruct the Bank of England to sell more than half of Britain's gold reserves. [100523]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* The Bank of England provided technical advice on the portfolio risks associated with gold and other assets, and the various techniques for selling gold.

Cologne Council

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the exchanges held with the President of the European Parliament at the Cologne Council. [101018]

The Prime Minister: The then President of the European Parliament, Jose Maria Gil-Robles, addressed the first session of the Cologne European Council, setting out the European Parliament's views on the main issues for discussion.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the form of changes required in work organisation and working time for the creation of jobs, as stated in section 10 of the Presidency Conclusions of the Cologne Summit. [101022]

The Prime Minister: The Presidency Conclusions of the Cologne European Council

> "invited the Commission and the member states to examine whether and how to . . . make changes in work organisation and working time help generate new jobs",

as well as examining other areas. The Finnish Presidency held a conference on working time and work organisation in Helsinki on 11–12 October.

The Government believe that companies themselves are best placed to achieve changes in the organisation of work within the framework of minimum standards established by Government. The Government support fair minimum standards on working time, but we do not believe that there is a fixed amount of work in the economy and, therefore, do not consider that reducing working time for individuals will increase employment as a whole.

The Government are promoting a family friendly employment rights agenda which will help both women and men to combine work with family commitments. In turn, this will help employers to attract a diverse range of people who can fit the different working patterns required for the modern economy.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister when the European Council will release to the public, pursuant to section 36 of the Cologne Presidency Conclusions, a report on global year 2000 preventative measures. [101014]

The Prime Minister: As a result of the Cologne European Council the European Commission set up a High Level Working Group to look at cross border Y2K issues. The group has met regularly and has discussed a wide range of issues. The Commission issued a report on 26 November (COM 1999 639 final), a copy of which is available in the Library of the House.

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister in connection (1) with what areas the Government expects extension of qualified majority voting will be raised during the forthcoming intergovernmental conference; and what is his Government's policy thereon; [101024]

(2) in what areas the Government support an extension of qualified majority voting at the forthcoming intergovernmental conference. [101025]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 9 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 486W.

European Employment Pact

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister what measures are planned under the three pillars of the European Employment Pact; if Parliament will be consulted; and what budget lines and finances will be available. [101019]

The Prime Minister: The European Employment Pact agreed at the Cologne European Council on 3–4 June 1999 brought together three processes. Two of these were the existing Luxembourg employment process and the Cardiff economic reform process. The third, new element was the macro-economic dialogue, termed the "Cologne process". The dialogue takes place biannually among social partners and fiscal and employment policy makers from existing institutions and considers the interaction between economic and employment policies.

All elements of the Pact are subject to the usual Parliamentary Scrutiny procedures. The Pact is an amalgam of three processes and therefore there are no new budget lines.

"Youth and Europe—Our Future"

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister what is his Government's policy towards developing EU action, pursuant to the memorandum, "Youth and Europe—Our Future"; and what type of projects are envisaged. [101020]

The Prime Minister: The memorandum "Youth and Europe—Our Future" was produced during the German Presidency of the Council of Ministers. It described a number of measures which, in the Presidency's view, would contribute to increasing the employability of young people in Europe. The Government welcomed this initiative and would consider on their merits any proposals for EU action that the European Commission or members states might put forward.

Downing Street Discussions

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the names of those present at the discussions at No. 10 Downing street on the evening of 21 October 1997. [101207]

The Prime Minister: As with previous Governments, it is not my practice to provide details of private meetings.

Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what was the cost of servicing the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee in the last year for which figures are available. [101211]

The Prime Minister: No separate costs for the servicing of the Joint Consultative Committee are identified.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what rules of confidentiality apply to non-ministerial members of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee concerning discussions in that forum. [101213]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 485W.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister who sits on the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee. [101210]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Mr. Clarke) on 21 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1123–35W.

EU Commissioners

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the timetable for the handover of Commissioner portfolios from the temporary incumbents. [101017]

The Prime Minister: The new Commission was sworn in on 17 September.

Social Exclusion Unit

Ms Squire: To ask the Prime Minister if he has received the review of the Social Exclusion Unit; and if he will make a statement. [101681]

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister what reviews have taken place of the work of the Social Exclusion unit since its inception; and what decisions have been taken on the long-term future of the unit. [100696]

The Prime Minister: I established the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) in December 1997. Its remit is to help improve Government action to reduce social exclusion by producing

"joined up solutions to joined up problems".

Most of its work is on specific projects, chosen by me following consultation with other Ministers and suggestions from interested groups.

Since its inception, the unit has focused on the following priorities: truancy and school exclusion, rough sleeping, poor neighbourhoods, teenage pregnancy and 16–18-year-olds not in employment, education or training. The unit has reported to me on each, with a full analysis

of the problem and concrete recommendations for action, all of which I have accepted. These are now Government policy and are being implemented.

I announced in December 1998 that, as the unit was set up on a time-limited basis, its success would be reviewed in the summer 1999, and a decision announced about its longer term future and work programme.

During the summer, this review was undertaken by KPMG, working with members of the SEU. The review took evidence and opinions in writing and face to face with a large number of individuals and organisations with an interest in the work of the unit. The review has now reported to me and the full review report will be published to coincide with this announcement.

The consultation showed that there is overwhelming support for the continued existence of the SEU, and a widespread belief that it has been a success in terms of operation and its effect on wider Government policy, although it is too early to judge the impact of the SEU on the ground.

In particular, the quality of the unit's reports was considered exceptional and its working practices, with a mix of civil service and external staff, was seen as a strength. The approach could be used more widely across the whole of Government. It is also clear that the unit's work has done much to raise the profile of social exclusion as a policy issue within and outside Government.

It is clear from both from the quality of the unit's work and its impact so far that there is a role for it to play for some years to come. I have therefore decided that it will continue in existence, and be reviewed again at the end of 2002.

In the short term, I have set the unit the following new priorities as a result of this review. They are:

to complete the current programme of work to develop the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal, including oversight of the work of the 18 policy action teams. The unit will be closely involved in establishing the arrangements for implementation of the strategy after it is announced in the summer of 2000;

to work closely with HM Treasury and other Government Departments to ensure that the 2000 spending review reflects the priority the Government gives to tackling poverty and social exclusion; and

to bolster the arrangements for monitoring implementation of past reports. I have asked the Minister for the Cabinet Office to chair the Ministerial Network on Social Exclusion, which will be given a new remit to chase progress across Government on implementation of past SEU reports, as well as acting as an informal sounding board for the unit's future work programme. I have also expanded the Network's membership to enable it to meet this new remit.

The membership of the Ministerial Network is:

Mo Mowlam (chair), Cabinet Office

Wendy Alexander MSP, The Scottish Executive, Development Department

Hilary Armstrong, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions

Paul Boateng, Home Office

Yvette Cooper, Department of Health

Lord Falconer, Cabinet Office

Patricia Hewitt, Department of Trade and Industry

Kate Hoey, Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Jane Hutt AM, National Assembly for Wales, Health and Social Services

Estelle Morris, Department for Education and Employment

Jeff Rooker, Department of Social Security

Andrew Smith, HM Treasury

Baroness Blackstone, Department for Education and Employment

Arrangements for Network representation from Northern Ireland will be announced shortly.

I will announce a new work programme for the unit in the summer of 2000, once it has finished its current project to develop the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal.

The full review report will be placed in the Library and on the SEU website.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Restraining Equipment

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if his Department takes the United Nations' Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners into account before granting export licences for oversize cuffs, jumbo cuffs and other restraining equipment. [98542]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 22 November 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) on 23 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 84–85W.

Inward Investment

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the total number of jobs *(a)* created and *(b)* safeguarded by inward investment projects in the areas covered by each of the Government Offices for the Regions in each year since 1996. [100463]

Mr. Caborn: The figures in the table are based on information provided by companies at the time of the announcement of the decision to invest in the UK. They are based on the companies' best estimate, at that time, of the number of jobs to be created/safeguarded by the investment in its first three years.

There is no requirement to notify the Department and so the figures include only those projects where the Department's Invest in Britain Bureau, the relevant Regional Development Agency in England or the Government Office were involved or which have come to their notice.

Region	*Number of projects*	*Total new jobs*	*Total safe jobs*	*Total associated jobs*
1996–97				
East	9	925	470	1,395
East Midlands	23	1,343	4,770	6,113
London	40	2,711	1,205	3,916
North East	46	3,089	4,529	7,618

Region	Number of projects	Total new jobs	Total safe jobs	Total associated jobs
North West	46	1,556	3,032	4,588
South East	46	3,775	2,756	6,531
South West	30	2,504	8,922	11,232
West Midlands	76	4,350	15,351	19,701
Yorkshire and the Humber	36	1,887	3,503	5,390
Total	306	22,140	44,538	33,378
1997–98				
East	33	935	17,744	18,679
East Midlands	18	1,686	758	2,444
London	62	2,898	444	3,342
North East	47	2,649	9,890	12,539
North West	71	4,944	7,277	12,221
South East	57	5,534	7,482	13,016
South West	40	3,205	1,735	4,940
UK	3	175	0	175
West Midlands	81	5,641	12,546	18,187
Yorkshire and the Humber	65	2,874	15,131	18,005
Total	477	30,541	73,007	103,548
1998–99				
East	41	1,411	2,575	3,986
East Midlands	19	2,096	730	2,826
London	100	4,025	1,796	5,821
North East	35	2,304	6,953	9,257
North West	66	3,249	9,123	12,372
South East	74	4,597	13,957	18,554
South West	34	7,908	1,417	4,423
UK	2	50	5,800	5,850
West Midlands	71	5,478	9,323	14,801
Yorkshire and the Humber	84	3,543	18,372	21,915
Total	526	34,661	70,046	104,707

Government Offices for the Regions

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people are employed at each of the Government Offices for the Regions; and what are their annual administration costs. [100465]

Mr. Caborn: The number of staff in post in each Government Office at 1 November 1999 and their administrative costs for the 1998–99 financial year are as follows:

	Staff	Administrative costs (£000)
South East	245	8,561
South West	213	6,985
London	378	13,238
North East	254	8,619
North West	407	13,702
East Midlands	229	6,754
West Midlands	268	9,474
East of England	190	6,269
Yorkshire and the Humber	266	8,684

Post Offices

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many post offices were closed or relocated in *(a)* the Vale of Glamorgan and *(b)* Wales in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999. [100475]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that the numbers of post offices closed or relocated in Wales since 1997 are as follows:

	Closed	Relocated
1997	23	12
1998	27	8
1999 to date	24	1

The Post Office tell me that they do not hold such information on a Parliamentary constituency basis.

Arms Exports

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimates have been made of the financial costs to Her Majesty's Government of promoting or providing financial cover for arms exports for the current financial year. [100581]

Mr. Caborn: No specific estimate is made for defence claims however £400.8 million is included in our published estimates this financial year to cover all claims payments.

All claims are recoverable. Authorised claims during the financial year to end September 1999 amount to £128.7 million of which £59.9 million are defence related.

Small Business Service

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by how much the resources of the Small Business Service will be reduced as a result of his decision not to establish a payroll service as an integral part of the Small Business Service. [100739]

Ms Hewitt: The level of resources for the Small Business Service will be considered over the next few months.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the advice given to the Small Businesses Service on how to enhance co-operative forms and businesses and small enterprise. [101070]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* There is no separate advice specifically for co-operatives. The

Small Business Service, through the network of Business Link franchises, will provide advice and business support services to help all types of small and medium-sized enterprises.

WTO (China)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his policy towards the accession of China to the WTO, indicating the role accorded to human rights issues. [101107]

Mr. Caborn: The Government will continue to support the European Commission's efforts to negotiate an agreement with China regarding the terms of its accession to the World Trade Organisation. We will be seeking to ensure that the Commission's approach to that negotiation continues to take into account the interests in the Chinese market of UK exporters and investors, both actual and potential, and maintains the integrity of the WTO as a multilateral system of rules agreed by and equally applicable to all members.

The Government believe that a more liberal approach to international trade and membership of the World Trade Organisation will bring benefits to, and improve living standards in, the Chinese economy and that social, environmental and political improvements in China will follow as a result. The Government fully support China's accession on the terms outlined above and looks forward to her becoming a WTO member in the near future.

EU-US Trade Relations

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the form of the early warning system for the resolution of disputes under the Transatlantic Dialogue, referred to in section 84 of the Cologne Conclusions; and which institutions are involved in that dialogue. [101108]

Mr. Caborn: A joint statement on an early warning mechanism was agreed at the EU/US Summit in Bonn on 21 June 1999. Both sides underlined the need to identify, provide early warning of, and facilitate the resolution of, potential bilateral EU/US disputes. Any side may raise with the other any issue that might have an impact on EU/US relations. The two principal groups in which this dialogue and exchange of information takes place are the Transatlantic Economic Partnership Steering Group and the New Transatlantic Agenda Task Force. Co-ordinating this work, the Senior Level Group of officials reviews early-warning items in preparation for the six-monthly EU/US Summits. The Transatlantic Legislators' Business, Consumer, Environment and Labour Dialogues have also been invited to contribute to the process by identifying problems and offering proposals for resolution.

ECGD

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of ECGD cover was made available to *(a)* the aerospace industry, *(b)* sales of military aircraft, *(c)* sales of defence-related equipment and *(d)* civil aircraft sales, in each of the last five years. [100509]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 1 December 1999]:* The table lists by financial year the percentage of ECGD cover made available for each of the sectors requested.

Business by Financial Year—Percentage split by type of business

Percentage

	Military business		*Non-military business*	
	Aircraft	*Non-aircraft*	*Aerospace*	*Non-aerospace*
1994–95	2.49	18.33	32.91	46.27
1995–96	10.22	12.49	17.43	59.86
1996–97	9.16	6.50	28.59	55.75
1997–98	6.96	16.22	23.98	52.84
1998–99	30.67	20.74	21.68	26.91

Note:
Underlying business figures have been converted to Sterling equivalents at 31 October 1999 exchange rates.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was *(a)* the value of receipts to and *(b)* the value of payments from the ECGD in connection with aerospace projects for businesses receiving ECGD cover, in each of the last five financial years. [100508]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 1 December 1999]:* The information requested is available only since 1996. The details are as follows:

£ million

Year	*(a)*	*(b)*
1996–97	26.9	10.8
1997–98	58.8	4.5
1998–99	38.0	23.1
1999–2000 to 30 September	12.3	55.5

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the value to the UK economy of the work of the ECGD over the last 10 years. [100510]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 1 December 1999]:* No formal estimate of the value to the UK economy of ECGD's activities has been made in the last 10 years. However, since the privatisation of ECGD's short term business operations in 1991, the Department has facilitated approximately £30 billion of capital goods and project exports for UK exporters.

Mr. Bermingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he intends to publish the ECGD's Annual Report and Trading Accounts for 1998–99. [101474]

Mr. Byers: The Report and Accounts were laid before the House this morning. I am pleased to say that they demonstrate once more that British exporters, with Government support, have been successful in winning valuable overseas orders, despite 1998–99 being a difficult period for the global economy. Furthermore, they show that ECGD's finances are in a very healthy position, which must be good news for their ability to support further business while protecting the interests of the taxpayer.

Postage Rates (SMEs)

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the

costs to small and medium-sized business enterprises trading in Europe of the increase in letter postage rates from the United Kingdom to Europe over the last six months. [101189]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Changes to postage tariffs are primarily a matter for the Post Office in consultation with the Post Office Users' National Council (POUNC) to whom the Post Office is statutorily required to refer major proposals for comment. The proposals are formally notified to my Department at the same time as they are referred to POUNC. The increase was prompted by increasing handling costs and is in line with the agreement, set out in the European Postal Services Directive, that prices should be geared to costs. It is still one of the cheapest rates in Europe.

Internet Shopping

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact on small businesses of fraudulent Internet transactions. [101323]

Ms Hewitt: Encouraging small businesses to use the Internet is a key part of the Government's commitment to making the UK the best place for e-commerce by 2002. We will monitor closely issues such as Internet fraud which may affect them.

The Government are working with the industry and consumers groups, in consultation with the OFT to develop a new body called TrustUK to accredit e-commerce codes and a "hallmark" that accredited codes may use on their websites. TrustUK will be operational by early next year.

The Electronic Communications Bill promotes high quality cryptography services which will allow people to have more confidence about whom they are dealing with on the Internet and to protect the confidentiality of data (e.g. payment details). The Government welcome the proposals by the Alliance for Electronic Business to meet the objectives of Part I of the Bill and ensure the appropriate standards for such services through accreditation under its T-scheme.

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what advice his Department has issued to consumers regarding security of financial details when shopping on the Internet. [101324]

Ms Hewitt: The Department has published general advice on its website (http://www2.dti.gov.uk/cacp/ca/supply2.htm) about the precautions consumers should take when they shop on-line. This includes checking that businesses offer secure payment facilities.

DTI's Consumer Gateway (http://www.consumer.gov.uk) provides links to a range of consumer websites, including ones such as that run by the Office of Fair Trading, which offer detailed advice about shopping electronically.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many companies have been reported to his Department for attempting to evade the national minimum wage. [101300]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Over 3,400 complaints of non-compliance have been received to date by the National Minimum Wage Helpline.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to uprate the national minimum wage annually; and if he will make a statement. [101480]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have no plans to uprate the national minimum wage annually. As with its introduction, any changes to the minimum wage rates will be made sensibly and taking account of the economic circumstances prevailing at the time.

SCOTLAND

Maintained Schools

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much was spent per pupil in maintained schools in Scotland in each year for each of the last 20 years. [98578]

Dr. Reid: The available information is given in the table. Education in Scotland is now a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Net current expenditure per pupil in local authority schools

£

Year	*Expenditure per pupil*
1979–80	649
1980–81	838
1981–82	974
1982–83	1,069
1983–84	1,155
1984–85	1,223
1985–86	1,293
1986–87	1,426
1987–88	1,587
1988–89	1,753
1989–90	1,938
1990–91	2,098
1991–92	2,252
1992–93	2,385
1993–94	2,377
1994–95	2,421
1995–96	2,496
1996–97	2,510
1997–98[1]	2,537

[1] Due to changes in funding arrangements for pre-school provision, the nursery component for 1997–98 includes an estimated expenditure element.

Notes:

1. The per pupil figure relates to nursery, primary, secondary and special schools.
2. The figures are net current expenditure excluding costs of home to school transport, school meals, education authority central administration costs, and loan and leasing changes.
3. Figures derived from local authority financial returns (LFR 1).

Post Office

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the principal activities of his Department and its agencies which provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices and *(b)* other post offices; if he will assess

whether the level of business generated in each case is likely to increase or decrease over the next five years; and which new areas of business for post offices are likely to be developed by his Department and its agencies over the same period. [99553]

Mr. Wilson: The Scotland Office currently has no activities which provide business for Crown or other post offices and I do not expect the position to change significantly over the next five years.

No specific areas of new business for post offices are foreseen but the targets for electronic delivery of services (50 per cent. by 2005, 100 per cent. by 2008) represent a real opportunity for additional business for the Post Office network across all public services delivered by central or local Government.

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what has been spent by his Department on external consultants and advisers since May 1997 funded from (i) his Department's programme provision and (ii) his Department's running costs. [99493]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 10 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 626–27W. All expenditure by my Department on external consultants since May 1997 has been funded from running costs provision.

Highlands and Islands

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his liaison role in respect of the future of oil fabrication in the Highlands and Islands. [101439]

Mr. Wilson: I am, of course, extremely concerned about the impact of the job losses announced by Barmac, and the situation faced by all UK oil fabrication yards. These are issues being addressed by the oil and Gas Industry Task Force, of which I am a member. As agreed at its meeting last week, plans are already under way for a group to meet as soon as possible to clarify how they can together best help the industry adapt to the changes in the market.

This is being copied for information to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy).

Barmac Oil

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to meet the management and unions at the Barmac oil fabrication yards. [101438]

Mr. Wilson: I will be meeting representatives of the management and work force of Barmac later this week. The Government and the Scottish Executive will continue to work together closely to tackle the problems resulting from the lack of new construction orders for oil fabrication yards.

This is being copied for information to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy).

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Clay Pigeon Shooting

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what Government funding is made available for research into *(a)* materials used and *(b)* safety procedures for clay pigeon shooting. [100667]

Kate Hoey: None. The Government have not been asked to fund any such research.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the breakdown is by region of the number of tickets to the Millennium Dome sold within the first eight weeks for which tickets were on sale. [99334]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* Ticket sales and reservations are running ahead of NMEC's expectations. They passed the one million mark on 10 November. In February 2000 NMEC will release information about attendance at the Dome during January, and on a monthly basis thereafter.

Visitor Attractions

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people visited Britain's visitor attractions in 1998; and what is his estimate of the number of visitors in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 2000. [101159]

Janet Anderson: In 1998 there were 408 million visits to 6,164 tourist attractions across the UK.

My Department has no figures or forecasts for the number of visits to tourist attractions in 1999 or 2000. The British Tourist Authority has forecast that the number of holidays taken in the UK (by domestic or overseas visitors) will be over 10 per cent. higher in 2000 than in 1998. This suggests that there will be a strong demand for tourist attractions in 2000.

EU Recycling Directive

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what account he has taken of the EU Directive on Recycling in setting the terms of reference for his working party for the digital switch-over. [100863]

Janet Anderson: We have not set up a working party for digital switch-over, but we will be formally reviewing progress on availability and affordability of digital services every two years with industry, regulators and consumer groups. We expect many analogue television sets to be replaced by digital sets as part of the normal cycle of set replacement. Analogue sets need not be scrapped as they can be converted to digital by using a set top box.

Museum Staff

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people were employed in Britain's museums *(a)* in each of the past 20 years, *(b)* on 10 July 1997 and *(c)* on the most recent date available. [101312]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The most recent (1998) survey by the Digest of Museum Statistics (DOMUS) reports that 12,590 paid permanent staff (full-time equivalent), 2,775 paid temporary staff (full-time equivalent) and 25,506 volunteers were employed in 1,188 museums that responded to the survey. The 1997 DOMUS survey reported 11,245 paid permanent staff (full-time equivalent), 2,358 paid temporary staff (full-time equivalent) and 20,120 volunteers in 1,214 museums that responded to the survey. In July 1999 there were 1,761 museums with full or provisional registration. I am not aware of reliable or comparable figures that could be used to estimate the numbers over the previous 18 years.

WALES

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what motor mileage allowance rates his Department offers to *(a)* ministers and *(b)* civil servants using their own vehicles for official business; and what has been the cost of each in each of the last five years. [98714]

Mr. Murphy: Ministers travelling on official business may use a private car instead of an official car, and claim the mileage allowance in the same circumstances and on the same terms as civil servants in my Department, at the rates set out below:

Cars with engine capacity up to 1500cc is 35p per mile for the first 4,000 miles in a year, and 20p per mile thereafter in that year.

Cars with engine capacity between 1501cc-2000cc is 45p per mile for the first 4,000 miles in a year, and 25p per mile thereafter in that year.

Cars with engine capacity over 2000cc is 48p per mile for the first 4,000 miles in a year, and 32p per mile thereafter in that year.

A Public Transport Rate of 23.8p per mile is payable when a private car is used although there are more cost-effective modes of transport available.

Figures are not available before financial year 1996–97. For the years since then there may be an unidentified mix of expenditure, but as nearly as can be determined the costs of motor mileage for Ministers and civil servants have been as follows:

£

	Ministers	*Civil Servants*
For the Welsh Office		
1996–97	9,555	293,792
1997–98	5,252	326,925
1998–99	9,424	389,408
1 April 1999–30 June 1999	1,006	112,269
For the Wales Office, following devolution		
1 July 1999–20 November 1999	575	1,179

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much his Department has spent on civil servants' transport in each of the last two years. [98713]

Mr. Murphy: All travel undertaken by civil servants complies with the requirements of the Civil Service Management Code. I refer my hon. Friend to the answer provided by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 1 December 1999, *Official Report,* column 256W.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much his Department has spent on ministerial transport in each of the last two years. [98712]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Ministers are required, under the terms of the 'Ministerial Code' and 'Travel by Ministers' to make efficient and cost effective travel arrangements. For information on spend on the Government Car Service, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 1 December 1999, *Official Report,* columns 255–256W.

Post Office

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the principal activities of his Department and its agencies which provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices and *(b)* other post offices; if he will assess whether the level of business generated in each case is likely to increase or decrease over the next five years; and which new areas of business for post offices are likely to be developed by his Department and its agencies over the same period. [99552]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department uses the postal services for routine correspondence, but does not normally undertake any other activities which provide business for either Crown post offices or other post offices. It is not possible to assess whether levels of correspondence will either increase or decrease substantially over the next five years, and currently no specific new areas of business for post offices seem likely to be developed by my Department.

Labour Statistics

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of households in Wales were workless at the latest date for which figures are available. [98494]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Labour Force Survey (Spring 1999) estimated the percentage of households in Wales of which no-one was in employment at 22 per cent.—based on households with at least one person of working age.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the locations in Wales where consent has been given for genetically modified crop planting. [100898]

Mr. Hanson: There were four applications to release Genetically Modified crops at sites in Wales in 1998, two at Whitehouse Farm, Newcastle, Monmouthshire and two at Great Cumberland Farm, Llanishen near Chepstow. Crops were sown at the former and harvested in September last year. At the other site, the farmer subsequently withdrew his application and no sowing took place.

Since then there have been no further applications in Wales.

Since May this year, applications for the release and marketing of GMOs in Wales are made to the National Assembly for Wales.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100158]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The term "research" covers a wide range of activities from scientific and engineering research through to consultancies and public opinion surveys. The information requested is not held centrally by my Department, and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Fraud

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what new initiatives he intends to introduce to reduce the amount of fraud in claiming social security payments. [101418]

Mr. Rooker: We set out our strategy for combating fraud and reducing error in "Safeguarding Social Security", published on 23 March 1999. We are putting this strategy into practice with strong and sensible safeguards to ensure the right money goes to the right people. Among the new initiatives that carry this wish forward are the following:

New more robust powers for fraud inspectors in The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill published on 1 December. These provisions give greater clarity and allow all benefit fraud investigations to proceed on the basis of common powers.

All payments will move to automated credit transfer (ACT) from 2003 as a modern, more secure and efficient method of paying benefits. This will virtually eliminate "instrument of payment" fraud and enhance security over the life of a claim. This is expected to yield annual fraud savings of around £140 million.

A regional radio campaign, from 1 November, costing some £500,000, with supporting adverts in local newspapers, to advertise the Benefit Fraud Hotline. This has led to thousands of extra calls to the Hotline.

Industrial Injuries Policy Group

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) when he expects the Benefits Agency's Industrial Injuries Policy Group will offer guidance to the agency in respect of the aggregation of life gratuities once the seven year period has elapsed arising from the case law CI/522/93, CI/1698/97 and CI/4766/97; [101046]

(2) on how many occasions and over what period of time the Benefits Agency's Industrial Injuries Policy Group has discussed guidance to be offered to the agency arising from case law CI/1522/93, CI/1698/97 and CI/4766/97. [101047]

Mr. Bayley: We are considering the implications of Commissioners' decisions CI/522/93, CI/1698/98 and CI/4766/97 which are about the aggregation of disablement assessments for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit which have been compensated by life gratuities. Once we have considered the decisions, the Benefits Agency will issue guidance to District Offices.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the information technology projects being undertaken by his Department and agencies responsible to his Department, including *(a)* the start date, *(b)* the planned completion date, *(c)* the current expected completion date, *(d)* the planned cost and *(e)* the current estimated cost; and if he will make a statement. [99628]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. The information that is available is in the table.

The projects listed are those currently being undertaken by the Department where the IT cost exceeds £5 million. Also listed are lesser value projects with an IT content that are deemed to be critical to the Department's business.

Project	*Start date*	*Planned completion date*	*Planned cost (£ million)*
IT projects in development stage			
DSS Year 2000 Programme[10]	1 July 1997	31 March 2000	[1]42.7
Site Backbone Upgrade[2,10]	November 1999	June 2000	5.8
DSS Corporate Intranet	June 1999	March 2001	[3]1.2
CSA Operations Re-organisation Project (ORP)	May 1998	31 March 2000	23.4
Decision Making and Appeals	3 February 1998	29 November 1999	32
Working Families Tax Credit	1 April 1998	22 February 2000	47.7
Data Protection/Freedom of Information Act(s)	18 November 1998	1 December 2001	55.1
Resource Accounting and Budgeting	1 September 1998	31 October 2000	1.5
Devolution (Scotland)	1 April 1998	31 March 2000	2.8
PSCS/INCAP—Changes to SDA (SDA Reform)	11 January 1999	1 April 2001	3.5
Disability Living Allowance Administrative Reforms	20 April 1999	[4]—	70.1
Order Book Control Service (OBCS)—National Rollout Project	5 July 1999	[5]1 April 2005	9.3
IT projects in the planning stage			
HQ Stakeholder Pensions Project[4, 10]	December 1998	April 2001	34
Child Support Reforms New Rules Implementation[3, 10]	January 1999	2003	[6]—
Bereavement Benefits[10]	1 January 1999	30 April 2001	17

Project	Start date	Planned completion date	Planned cost (£ million)
Payment Modernisation Programme[10]	21 May 1999	31 December 2005	240
AMS(P) Pensions Forecasting Project	19 January 1999	31 March 2001	20.1
State Second Pension (S2P)	1 December 1999	30 April 2002	25.5
Jobseeker's Allowance—New Deal for Partners of the Unemployed	1 October 1998	1 April 2000	6.4
Strategic Debt Solution Project	1 September 1999	1 October 2000	3.9
IT procurement projects			
ACCORD IS/IT Supply Programme (Office and Networks)	June 1999	April 2000	[7]50+
Associated projects			
ITSA Strategic Outsourcing Project	12 October 1999	2000	[6]—

[1] The planned Departmental cost is now £43.2 million. This is within the cost tolerance set by Treasury at +/- 5 per cent. or £1 million.
[2] "Site backbone" is the name given to the network components, hardware and software which provide high-speed volume connections between individual elements of the Departmental sites and into the Wide Area Networks linking the sites.
[3] Business case not yet approved.
[4] While this Department is funding the project, the IT is being provided by the Inland Revenue contract with EDS and their contract with NIRS2.
[5] This is also a procurement project.
[6] Not yet quantifiable; business case currently under development.
[7] Business case not yet approved. Costs likely to be in excess of £50 million.
[8] Ongoing—end date not known
[9] Latest
[10] "+" denotes projects with IT cost exceeding £5 million

Social Security Helplines

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list all the social security helplines, with the number of calls received over the latest 12 month period. [99914]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Number of calls to social security helplines received during the period 1 October 1998 to 30 September 1999

Enquiry line	Number of calls
Benefit Enquiry Line	1,200,000
CSA National Enquiry Line	2,857,171
DLA Helpline	5,094,316
Family Credit Helpline	3,546,876
Pensions Direct	751,063
Disabled Person's Tax Credit Information Helpline	98,756
Overseas Telephone Liaison	[1]—
Child Benefit Enquiry Line	2,174,715
War Pensions Helpline	551,767
Winter Fuel Helpline	200,847
CSA Client Helpline	2,919,626
Total	19,395,137

[1] Figure unavailable

Housing Benefit Fraud

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to ensure that local authorities carry out adequate checks on housing benefit claimants in order to reduce the amount of bogus claims. [101419]

Mr. Rooker: We inherited a flawed system which placed far too much emphasis on the detection of fraud once it had occurred. Working in partnership with local authorities, we are transforming the delivery of Housing Benefit by emphasising the importance of getting it right to begin with and keeping it right during the life of a claim.

We are financing local authorities to focus on both the prevention and detection of fraud with the introduction of the Verification Framework. The Framework specifies the evidence which must be verified before a claim can be paid and sets out the checks which must be made during the life of a claim. We have made £100 million available to allow all local authorities to implement this important new initiative. So far, we have funded the implementation of the Framework in 223 local authorities. We want all local authorities to adopt the high standards set by the Framework and we have embarked on a programme to increase its take up, particularly among the highest spending authorities.

From 6 September 1999, with the application of Section 19 of the Fraud Act, all new claims for Housing Benefit are subject to tough new identity checks to ensure that all claimants can be linked with the appropriate National Insurance number.

As part of our strategy to ensure that local authorities have in place arrangements for the secure and accurate administration of Housing Benefit, we have instructed the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate to focus their attention on the 30 largest local authorities who between them account for almost a third of the total expenditure on Housing and Council Tax Benefit. These authorities will have been inspected or revisited by the summer of next year and a report will be published with recommendations on each authority which we will follow up. This will allow us to measure their progress in the fight against fraud.

We have also made good progress in preventing the significant amount of fraud which occurs when fraudsters make false claims and then redirect benefit mail from addresses at which they are not resident. The Royal Mail Do Not Redirect scheme was introduced nationally from 1 February this year and will stop the redirection of appropriately marked benefit mail. To date, over 200 local authorities have taken up this initiative and we are aiming that all authorities will adopt this service.

Poverty

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many families were officially living in poverty *(a)* in each of the past 20 years, *(b)* on 1 May 1997 and *(c)* on the most recent date available. [101309]

Mr. Bayley: Poverty and social exclusion are complex multi-dimensional issues, affecting many aspects of people's lives; their income, health, housing, the quality of the environment, opportunities to work and to learn. There is no single measure which can capture the complex problems which need to be overcome.

We are determined to tackle the problems that condemn many individual and communities to poverty. That is why we set out our strategy for tackling poverty and social exclusion in our first annual report "Opportunity for all" (Cm 4445). The report includes a range of indicators that capture many of the aspects of poverty and social exclusion.

Information on the indicators, including definitions and baseline data, was placed in the Library on 21 September to accompany "Opportunity for all". One of the indicators monitors the proportion of people living in low income households. Further information on low income statistics are published (annually in recent years) in Households Below Average Income (HBAI). The results can be found in the HBAI publication for the relevant year in the Library.

Benefit Payments (Post Offices)

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what representations he has received about the impact of changes in the way social security benefits are paid on the viability of post offices; [101376]

(2) what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about the impact of changes in the way social security benefits are paid on the viability of post offices. [101374]

Mr. Rooker: We have received a number of such representations. Ministers and officials in this Department have had a number of discussions with their counterparts in the Department of Trade and Industry about the planned move to automated credit transfer for the payment of benefits.

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate *(a)* the number and *(b)* the percentage of pensioner benefit units receiving income support in each of the last 10 years; if he will provide his estimate for the remainder of the public expenditure planning period; and if he will provide separate figures for single and married pensioners. [101079]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Pensioner benefit units receiving Income Support (private households) Great Britain, (1987–99)

Year	*IS pensioners*	*Percentage*	*Couples*	*Percentage*	*Single*	*Percentage*
May 1988	1,598,000	19.5	281,000	7.8	1,317,000	28.5
May 1989	1,461,000	17.7	233,000	6.4	1,229,000	26.5
May 1990	1,514,000	18.2	247,000	6.5	1,267,000	27.9
May 1991	1,381,000	16.5	211,000	5.5	1,170,000	25.7
May 1992	1,419,000	17.0	227,000	5.9	1,192,000	26.5
May 1993	1,503,000	17.6	266,000	6.7	1,237,000	27.1
May 1994	1,538,000	18.3	279,000	7.2	1,259,000	27.8
May 1995	1,555,000	18.6	284,000	7.2	1,272,000	28.5
May 1996	1,533,000	18.3	279,000	7.1	1,254,000	28.5
May 1997	1,486,000	17.5	263,000	6.5	1,223,000	27.5
May 1998	1,433,000	n/a	251,000	n/a	1,182,000	n/a
May 1999	1,405,000	n/a	244,000	n/a	1,161,000	n/a

Notes:

1. Pensioner benefit units in private households exclude claimants in Residential care and Nursing Homes.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand, percentages given to one decimal place.
3. Figures refer to benefit units, which may be a single person or couple.
4. Income Support for the unemployed was replaced by Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance from October 1996. Income Support figures from 1997 exclude unemployed.
5. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where either the claimant and/or partner are aged 60 or over.
6. Income Support figures are based on a 1 per cent. sample up to 1993 and a 5 per cent. sample thereafter.
7. All Percentages are Income Support benefit units expressed as a proportion of all pensioner benefit units (private households).
8. The percentages quoted are based on pensioner benefit units estimates for Great Britain private households taken from the Family Resources Survey (FRS) for 1993–94 to 1997–98 and the Family Expenditure Survey HBAI datasets from 1988 to 1992.
9. FRS estimates are based on sample counts that have been adjusted for non-response using multi-purpose grossing factors that control for region, Council Tax Band and a number of demographic variables. Estimates are subject to sampling error and to variability in non-response.
10. Details of all pensioner benefit units are not yet available for 1999 therefore no percentage is given for this year.

Sources:

1. Income Support Statistics Annual Enquiries, May 1987-May 1993.
2. Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, May 1994-May 1999.
3. Family Resources Survey.
4. Family Expenditure Survey HBAI datasets from 1988 to 1992.

Forecasts for Income Support pensioner benefit units 1999–2000–2001–02

Pensioners (thousand)	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Singles	1,151	1,144	1,119
Couples	242	238	231
Total	1,393	1,382	1,350

Note:
Information on the population of pensioner households in the period 2000–02 is not available, therefore we are unable to provide an estimate of the percentage of Income Support pensioner benefit units for this period.
Source:
PBR Forecasts November 1999 based on data up to May 1999.

CSA Reform

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his oral statement of 29 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 5, if he will list the pieces of information which are currently required in order to assess liability for child maintenance; and if he will identify which of these will be required under his proposed reforms. [101036]

Angela Eagle: The current child support formula requires a wide range of information to be obtained, not only about the financial and family circumstances of the parents involved but also about their new partners. This can include details of their income from earnings, benefits or other sources, housing costs (such as mortgages, rent, service charges, council tax, home improvement loans, property and loan insurance), travel to work costs and clean break property settlements.

The new child support rates will require information to be obtained only about the non-resident parent's income and the number of children for whom he is responsible. The definition of what is to count as income will also be considerably simplified as set out in Annexe Two of the White Paper "Children's Rights and Parent's Responsibilities" (Cm. 4349) published on 1 July 1999.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his written answer of 29 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 51W if the proposed amendment to Section 6(1) of the Child Support Act 1991 will apply in cases where a claim for income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance proves to be fraudulent. [101130]

Angela Eagle: As now section 6(1) of the 1991 Act will apply where a parent with care claims or is paid Income Support or income based Jobseeker's Allowance. If the payment of benefit subsequently turns out to have been fraudulent, section 6(1) will only cease to apply when payments stop.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Car Theft

23. **Mr. Flight:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to reduce the number of car thefts; and if he will make a statement. [99698]

Mr. Charles Clarke: On 22 September, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary launched the Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team strategy document. That strategy is intended to deliver the Government's 30 per cent. vehicle crime reduction target by the end of March 2004.

Police (Crime Prevention)

25. **Mr. Hawkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to encourage an increase in the proportion of time spent by police officers on fighting crime. [99701]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The deployment of police officers is the operational responsibility of Chief Constables. However, the introduction of best value into the police service from April next year and the requirement that year on year efficiency savings of 2 per cent. must be recycled into front-line policing should allow Chief Constables to allocate more officers to the essential job of reducing crime.

Information Technology systems being delivered under the National Strategy for Police Information Systems (NSPIS) and new radio technology for the police being provided as part of the Public Safety Radio Communications Project (PSRCP) will do much to free officers from administrative burdens.

The NSPIS Custody application draws much of the criminal history information required for effective administration of those in custody automatically from the Police National Computer, saving police time, effort and paperwork. The NSPIS Case Preparation system is designed to produce all the information needed by the police, courts, Crown Prosecution Service and other bodies to process cases automatically. This, too, will substantially reduce the administrative burden on police officers, freeing them for front line duties. Holmes 2 harnesses modern technology to make the best use of police resources used in the investigation of major crimes. NSPIS Crime automates the recording of crime reports, saving effort in compilation and making them easier to use in crime management and intelligence led policing. The National Management Information System (NMIS) provides an integrated set of tools to deliver the information commanders at all levels need to manage their resources as efficiently as possible to meet performance targets. NMIS will also enable data to be collected on a common basis to a standard format making it easier to collate and compare at the national level. This will reduce the burden on the police in producing returns and help Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in their work.

The NSPIS applications will be interlinked so that information can be shared electronically, and transmitted to front line officers via the new Public Safety Radio Communication System. These new applications will help free officers from the burden of paperwork and free them for front line duties.

Electoral Reform

26. **Ms Perham:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in reform of electoral procedure. [99702]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Representation of the People Bill had its Second Reading on 30 November.

Sex Offenders

27. **Mrs. Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps the Government are taking to ensure that children and other members of the public are protected from sex offenders. [99704]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government are committed to protecting children and others from sex offenders. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 contained strong additional safeguards in the new sex offender orders and extended supervision provisions. This session we are bringing forward proposals for a scheme to prevent unsuitable people, including sex offenders, from working with children as part of the Crime and Public Protection Bill.

Mr. Shepherd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out his Department's policy on the notification of hon. Members of the release of sex offenders into bail hostels within their constituency; and in respect of that policy if he will list *(a)* the number of category A sex offenders placed in bail hostels within England and Wales in each of the past two years, *(b)* the notification given to his Department, in each case, prior to the offender being placed in a bail hostel and the notification given, in each case, to the hon. Member for the constituency where the hostel was located and *(c)* on how many occasions the notification given to hon. Members was less than four days. [101359]

Mr. Boateng: Over the last two years, two sex offenders who were category A prisoners were released to hostel accommodation. Home Office Ministers were notified of the release arrangements two weeks before the first prisoner's release and five weeks prior to the second prisoner's release. The hon. Members for the relevant constituencies received notification seven days and 34 days respectively prior to their release.

In addition to the arrangements for category A prisoners, the Department has, since 1 April 1999, operated an Early Warning system within the prison and probation services in relation to the release of offenders in respect of whom there is a strong risk that a serious violent or sexual offence will be committed after release and where there are victim issues; difficulties with the supervision plan or accommodation; and where it is likely that the case will be subject to media attention. Prisons and probation services are asked to give the Department two months notice of the release of an offender who meets these criteria.

Thirty such cases have been notified to the hon. Members concerned. The information was passed on as soon as we knew what the accommodation arrangements were going to be. I did this in order to reassure hon. Members of the safeguards which have been put in place. This is particularly important if there is likely to be a hostile media reaction so that hon. Members are able to respond if necessary. Many hon. Members have been very supportive to the local agencies responsible for managing dangerous offenders in the community, for which I am grateful.

I am currently reviewing the arrangements for handling these cases. As part of that review, I shall be writing to hon. Members individually to ascertain which of them wishes to continue to receive information, in confidence, about the release of dangerous offenders and offering further briefing to anyone who would find it useful. We are committed to doing all we can to ensure public safety, especially where dangerous offenders are concerned and we will continue to work with hon. Members to bring this about.

WPC Yvonne Fletcher

28. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been reported to him by the Metropolitan police in the case of WPC Yvonne Fletcher. [99705]

Mr. Straw: The criminal investigation by the Metropolitan Police into WPC Fletcher's murder is continuing. They intend to pursue this investigation vigorously and the arrival of our Ambassador in Tripoli later this month should help that process. The Metropolitan Police continue to expect full co-operation from the Libyan authorities.

UK Passport Agency

29. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the current backlog and turnaround times for passport applications are at the UK Passport Agency. [99706]

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has for improving the service provided by the UK Passport Agency. [99682]

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the current backlog and turnaround times are for passport applications at the UK Passport Agency. [99691]

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has for improving the service provided by the UK Passport Agency. [99695]

Mrs. Roche: I refer my hon. Friends to the announcement the Secretary of State made earlier today.

Refugee Dispersal

30. **Dr. Ladyman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the outcome to date of the policy of dispersal of refugees. [99707]

Mrs. Roche: We plan to bring in the new support arrangements in Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 on 1 April 2000. The National Asylum Support Service is currently drawing up plans for dispersal of asylum seekers. The statutory interim arrangements set out in Schedule 9 to the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 will come into effect on 6 December. These will underpin a voluntary dispersal scheme whereby asylum seekers seeking support from local authorities in London and Kent can be transferred on a voluntary basis to local authorities outside London and the South East.

Burglary

31. **Shona McIsaac:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps the Government are taking to ensure the elderly are protected from burglaries. [99708]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The elderly, like all age groups, will benefit from the £250 million Crime Reduction Programme that was launched in July 1998 as an evidence-based approach to reducing crime, and from the Crime Reduction Strategy that we announced last week.

The Crime Reduction Programme includes the Reducing Burglary Initiative, under which more than £50 million will be used to support anti-burglary projects over three years covering some 2 million households in 500 areas with high levels of domestic burglary. Of the 63 strategic development projects already under way under this initiative, seven will specifically benefit the elderly.

In addition, we recently announced an £11 million project to provide security improvements for the homes of pensioners on low incomes in high burglary areas, in conjunction with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' New Home Energy Efficiency Scheme, which starts in June. We plan to announce in the Spring how the improved security arrangements will operate.

This scheme, along with the Reducing Burglary Initiative, will be evaluated to help identify what works most cost-effectively in which circumstances. The results will be disseminated to all partnerships to help them tackle their own burglary problems.

Home Office literature on crime prevention already includes detailed advice to help the elderly reduce the risk of burglary, including burglary by fraudulent callers.
We are also in the initial stages of developing a national programme to combat distraction burglary (the victims of which are mostly very elderly). This will use widespread publicity and improved intelligence and detection methods and will involve the police, other organisations such as Neighbourhood watch and the public utility companies.

Metropolitan Police

32. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the current number of officers in the Metropolitan police. [99709]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that, on the 31 October, there were 26,290 officers in the Metropolitan Police Service.

Health Service (Prisons)

33. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the operation of the health service in prisons. [99710]

Mr. Boateng: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced in a reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) on 29 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns 556–58W, a programme of reforms of the organisation and delivery of health services to prisoners. The Prison Service and National Health Service Executive, working in partnership, are establishing a Prison Health Care Task Force and a Joint Prison Health Policy Unit. These Units are implementing the recommendations of the Report on "The Future Organisation of Prison Health Care", published last March.

Trial by Jury

34. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations his Department has received on the number of people, in the last year for which figures are available, who opted for a trial by jury, as opposed to a magistrate, who changed their plea before the trial commenced. [99711]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the replies given to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 181W, by the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke).

35. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research findings he has obtained concerning abuse of the right to elect for trial by jury in either-way cases. [99712]

Mr. Straw: Research conducted by the Home Office showed that nearly 90 per cent. of convicted offenders who had elected Crown Court trial in 1989 had previous convictions and over a third had more than 10 previous convictions. Information is also available from the baseline data collected by the Home Office in 1998 for the evaluation of the pilot schemes to reduce delay in the criminal justice system. In a sample of nearly 1,000 cases in the six pilot areas, about 60 per cent. of those who elected for the Crown Court pleaded guilty before the trial started.

Public House Licensing

36. **Mr. Grogan:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to make changes to the public house licensing regime. [99713]

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to make changes to the public house licensing regime. [99699]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We aim to publish a White Paper early in the new year setting out our proposals for reform, and to bring forward a Bill when Parliamentary time permits.

Severe Personality Disorder

37. **Ms Coffey:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the Department of Health on the matter of severe personality disorder. [99714]

Mr. Boateng: The Government's proposals on severe personality disorder form a single piece of work which is the joint responsibility of the Home Office and the Department of Health. Work on all aspects of the proposals is being taken forward jointly with ongoing contact between officials of the two Departments.

Police Resources (Greater Manchester)

38. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on police resources in Greater Manchester. [99715]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced in a reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 176–78W, the provisional funding settlement for the Greater Manchester Police for 2000–01. The police authority's provisional funding allocation is £386 million. This is an increase of 2.8 per cent. over 1999–2000, which is in line with the average increase in funding for England and Wales next year. It will be for the police authority to set the budget for the next financial year. It is for the chief officer to determine staffing levels within the overall resources available.

The Government are also making available additional resources, as part of a new ring-fenced Crime Fighting Fund, to enable the police to recruit 5,000 officers over and above the number that forces would otherwise have recruited over the next three years from April 2000. The Greater Manchester Police Authority will be able to make a bid for a share of this funding.

Right to Remain

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the time taken to determine whether an individual has the right to remain in the UK, having first entered on a visitor's visa. [99690]

Mrs. Roche: Visa nationals who obtain a visit visa from a British Diplomatic Post and are given leave to enter the United Kingdom for up to six months as a visitor are, under the Immigration Rules, expected to leave the country at the end of that period.

Non-visa nationals who are given leave to enter the United Kingdom for up to six months as a visitor are also expected to leave the country at the end of that period. They may, however, apply for further leave to remain under a different category in accordance with the Immigration Rules. Straightforward applications which can be dealt with under a fast track system can usually be processed within about six weeks. Other applications which require lengthy examination or further inquiries will take longer to decide. We cannot give an average length of time for processing such applications as each is considered on its individual merits.

Civil Servants (Transport)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much his Department has spent on civil servants' transport in each of the last two years. [98698]

Mr. Straw: All travel undertaken by Home Office civil servants complies with the requirements of the Civil Service Management Code. The total spend on civil servants' transport in each of the last two years has been as follows:

	£
1998–99	12,538,635
1997–98	12,950,486

Ministerial Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much his Department has spent on ministerial transport in each of the last two years. [98697]

Mr. Straw: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to her by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 253–56W. In addition, the Home Office spent, in 1997–98, £161,984 (of which £161,884 was capital expenditure) and, in 1998–99, £29,035 on transport services for Ministers.

Drug-related Crime

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been arrested for drug-related crime on Merseyside in each year from 1995 onwards; how many were charged; how many were subsequently convicted; and how many were aged *(a)* between 14 and 16, *(b)* between 16 and 19, *(c)* between 19 and 29 and *(d)* over 29 years. [99432]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* No information is collected centrally on drug-related crime, only on offences under various specific drug legislation, mostly the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

The following information is available:

(a) Recorded Crime

Notifiable offences of trafficking in controlled drugs recorded by Merseyside police is as follows:

	Number
1995	698
1996	563
1997	694

For 1998–99 the coverage of notifiable offences was extended and revised principles for counting introduced. The following was recorded by Merseyside police:

	Number
Trafficking in controlled drugs	729
Possession of controlled drugs	4,737
Other drugs offences	154

(b) Stop/searches under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act

Numbers of persons/vehicles stopped and searched for drugs and number of arrests made for drugs by Merseyside police is as follows:

	Stop/searches	*Arrests*
1995	5,357	1,066
1996–97	11,324	2,030
1997–98	15,613	2,557

(c) Persons cautioned, proceeded against and convicted:

Numbers of persons cautioned, proceeded against at magistrates courts and found guilty at all courts within Merseyside police force area for indictable drug offences[1] by age group 1995–98

Age and year	*Total cautioned*	*Total proceeded against*	*Total found guilty*
1995	1,170	1,810	1,485
1996	1,457	1,956	1,563
1997	2,033	2,311	2,030
1998	2,309	2,615	2,359
of which:			
14–15 years of age			
1995	74	19	13
1996	77	23	16
1997	116	22	16
1998	143	40	29
16–18 years of age			
1995	361	212	174
1996	451	233	169
1997	544	270	240
1998	678	402	359
19–29 years of age			
1995	630	1,129	941
1996	797	1,172	963
1997	1,111	1,339	1,162
1998	1,176	1,413	1,304
30 and over			
1995	99	450	357
1996	130	526	414
1997	248	677	611
1998	295	759	667

[1] Trafficking in controlled drugs, possession of controlled drugs and other drug offences (principal offence basis)

There is no information specifically on the number charged. Figures on those cautioned and proceeded against are the nearest available centrally.

(d) Research

Home Office research involving the drug testing of arrestees strongly suggests that around a third of acquisitive crime is linked to drug taking. Further work is being conducted within this programme. The results of the next phase, including research on Merseyside, are due to be published by the end of June 2000.

Integrated Casework Directorate

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library a copy of the Business Plan of the Integrated Casework Directorate of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. [100490]

Mrs. Roche: I have placed in the Library a copy of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) Report for 1999, published on Tuesday 30 November, which reports on performance during 1998–1999 and sets out our programme to meet the published targets for 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02. The Report focuses on IND's key objectives underpinning the Home Office Aim 6, as set out in the Public Service Agreement and Home Office Business and Expenditure Plans (Command Paper 4205).

I have also placed in the Library a detailed business plan for the Integrated Casework Directorate as given to staff in July. The document was at that time a draft and remains a living document subject to continuing review. For example, numbers of staff already recruited, and current recruitment plans, exceed those stated in the draft business plan.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the current backlogs are in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate for *(a)* asylum cases, *(b)* general and settlement cases, *(c)* illegal entry, deportation and European cases and *(d)* nationality cases. [100488]

Mrs. Roche: The current backlog of cases for the various categories is set in the table:

	Number
Asylum cases	94,305
General and settlement cases	[1]27,200
European cases	[1]940
Deportation and illegal entry cases	[1]18,100
Nationality cases	100,000

[1] Figures relate to cases in the Integrated Casework Directorate, excluding those currently being actioned in caseworking groups and local enforcement offices.

The backlogs are being tackled by various initiatives. We have introduced streamlined measures for dealing with general casework across all Case Management Units. We are successfully piloting new processes to speed up the consideration of asylum cases, both new and in the backlog.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what procedures he is planning to enable his Department to identify asylum cases involving children to ensure a faster turn-around time after 1 April 2000. [100487]

Mrs. Roche: We have developed new procedures for speeding up the consideration of asylum applications. New family cases involving dependent children are being given priority. A database is being set up to monitor progress.

Mental Illness

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is in respect of restraint of people with a severe mental illness by methods based on the infliction of pain. [100719]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The restraint of any person must be within the law, which requires that the force used to prevent crime or to apprehend a suspect must be reasonable in all the circumstances.

Police guidelines on restraint provide a range of options based on the use of an appropriate necessary level of force. It is not, of course, always possible to determine immediately whether a person who needs to be restrained or apprehended is suffering from mental disorder.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action is being taken in response to the recommendations of the Police Complaints Authority on raising officers' awareness of the nature and impact of severe mental illness and about officers seeking advice and assistance when dealing with someone who is mentally ill. [100716]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that officers in both the Metropolitan Police and other forces in England and Wales receive formal training on mental illness as part of their probationer training. It is open to chief officers to provide additional training on this subject if there is a particular need for it. Home Office Circular 12/95 sets out advice for chief police officers and others on dealing with mentally disordered suspects or offenders, including the need to develop effective contacts with other local services and agencies. We have noted the recommendations of the Police Complaints Authority and will assess whether there is scope for further guidance to the police.

Custody Officers (Training)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action the Government proposes to take in response of the recommendation of the Home Affairs Committee's (Fourth report, Session 1998–99, HC 81) about enforcing a requirement that all custody officers receive training before commencing duties. [100717]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is essential that all police officers receive the training necessary to enable them to carry out their duties properly. The Government published options for future police training arrangements in a consultation document on 18 November. The principal aim of these proposals is to ensure that all officers and support staff are equipped to carry out their duties to common high standards. The Government will announce their final proposals early in 2000, shortly after the consultation period closes on 7 January.

Public Sector Openness

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on *(a)* the function and *(b)* the remit of the Advisory Group on Openness in the Public Sector. [100651]

Mr. Straw: The function of the Advisory Group on Openness in the Public Sector is to advise the Secretary of State on the steps needed to be taken ahead of legislation to create a culture of openness in all public services and lay the foundations for the implementation of a future Freedom of Information Act.

The remit of the Advisory Group is to:

advise the Home Secretary on proposals for promoting cultural change in the public sector to foster a culture of greater openness;

assist in the development of training and education programmes for public servants to promote cultural change and facilitate the introduction of Freedom of Information; and

undertake other tasks related to the implementation of Freedom of Information as directed by the Home Secretary.

The Group is chaired by the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), and the members are drawn from a variety of backgrounds. Some bring a specialist knowledge of an area of public service to the Group's work, while others have a particular interest in Freedom of Information on the management of change. Information about the Advisory Group, including information about its function and remit as well as accounts of its meetings, is published on the Home Office website.

The Group has today submitted its recommendations to me and I have placed a copy of the report in the Library.

Coroners' Services

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what consultations he has had with representatives of the Muslim and Jewish communities about the provision of coroners' services during the period between Christmas and the end of the Millennium holiday; [100586]

(2) what steps he has taken to ensure the adequate provision of coroners' services during the period between Christmas and the end of the Millennium holiday. [100587]

Mr. Boateng: The need for appropriate cover over this period has already been brought to the attention of the Coroners' Society and we expect to write to all coroners on this matter shortly. Coroners are required under the Coroners Rules to be available at all times to undertake duties in connection with inquests and post mortem examinations. (We have held no consultations with, nor received representations from, religious communities specifically during this period about cover). Responsibility for the availability of coroner services lies with the relevant coroner and the local council.

Emergency Planning (Holiday Period)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what advice he has issued to local authorities about emergency planning during the forthcoming Christmas and new year period. [100583]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Local authorities are expected to have generic emergency management arrangements. Recognising the unique features of this period, the Home Office has issued two additional guidance documents to local authorities and has made a major contribution to a range of Millennium specific seminars and workshops. In addition, a Millennium version of the "Exercise planners guide" was issued in January 1999.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the state of readiness of local authorities' emergency plans for the period by Christmas 1999 and new year 2000. [100582]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Each local authority is responsible for determining its own emergency planning arrangements. It should be able to respond effectively to any emergency at any time. However, the Home Office visited a range of local authorities to discuss the unique aspects of the Millennium date change period. On the basis of those visits, we are informed that local authorities are prepared for the period.

Immigration Rules

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria are used to assess the

validity of marriages in cases where the husband has been allowed residence in the United Kingdom following marriage. [100616]

Mrs. Roche: Before indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom is granted on the basis of marriage, we must be satisfied that the marriage is genuine and subsisting. Appropriate checks are carried out in order to ensure that these criteria are met. The validity of a marriage in cases where indefinite leave to remain has been granted would not normally be investigated unless there were strong grounds to believe that leave was obtained by deception.

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on co-operation between different Government agencies to *(a)* track down and *(b)* deport illegal immigrants. [100615]

Mrs. Roche: Staff in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND), including the Immigration Service (IS), work in co-operation with many other government agencies as appropriate, including the police, Benefits Agency and Contributions Agency, in detecting those who are suspected of being illegal immigrants or facilitating illegal entry. This liaison is allowed for under section 28(3) of the Data Protection Act 1994 which provides for the exchange of information where this is necessary to prevent or detect a crime.

The responsibility for deciding whether an illegal immigrant should be deported or otherwise removed rests with IND. No other government agencies are involved in this decision.

Jill Dando

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress of the police investigation of the murder of Jill Dando. [100589]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The investigation of crime within the Metropolitan Police District is an operational matter for the Commissioner. He tells me that this investigation is continuing, although no clear motive for the murder has yet emerged.

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when the Criminal Records Bureau will come into operation; and if he will make a statement; [100609]

(2) what is the estimated cost of establishing the Criminal Records Bureau; how many staff will be employed when it commences operations; and what is the estimated annual cost of running the Bureau. [100611]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The project to set up the Criminal Records Bureau is being managed within the framework of a Public Private Partnership. Final costs and staff numbers will depend upon the outcome of procurement action. This is under way. Bids were received on 19 November and are under evaluation. I have been reviewing the timetable of the project and I shall announce the outcome shortly.

Working Time Regulations (Police Exclusion)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the potential impact on the health and safety of police officers of their exclusion from the Working Time Regulations. [100628]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Working Time Regulations do apply to the Police Service. However, while the regulations clearly apply to police officers and support staff, there are a number of defined exceptions covering circumstances routinely encountered by operational police officers and support staff. Regulation 18 specifically exempts those police duties which inevitably conflict with the limits and entitlements provided for. Regulation 20 applies to workers whose duration of working time is not measured or predetermined, or can be determined by the worker him/herself. Regulation 21 applies in a range of circumstances, including duties in security or surveillance.

Chief officers have a 'duty of care' towards their employees and, although forces do have local arrangements in place in respect of the Working Time Regulations, we are aware that chief officers may need guidance on the issue for operational purposes. The Home Office will issue guidelines following discussions with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Health and Safety Executive.

Adlearn Foundation

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the findings of the Charity Commission Inquiry into the Adlearn Foundation. [100730]

Mr. Boateng: I understand from the Charity Commission that its inquiry began following the Commission's routine monitoring procedures.

The Charity Commission is satisfied that the way in which the trustees have now decided to wind up the charity is appropriate. I have asked the Chief Charity Commissioner to write to my hon. Friend, and I shall arrange for a copy of that letter to be placed in the Library.

Electrical Register

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the proposed restrictions on the use of the electoral register. [100831]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Annexe K to the Report of the Working Party on Electoral Procedures lists those who responded to the consultation exercise on this issue which was carried out in 1998.

Since publication of the Working Party's recommendation in July of this year, we have received a number of further representations from industries which make use of the electoral register, from members of the public and from hon. Members.

Intrusion Classification System

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he issues to police authorities on the use of CLASSIC (Covert Local Area Sensor System for Intrusion Classification); and if he will make a statement. [100845]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None.

Edwards Report

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the implementation of the recommendations of the Edwards report. [100850]

Mr. Straw: My intention is to publish a progress report early in the New Year.

Life Sentences (Murder)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people currently subject to life imprisonment for murder are awaiting the outcome of a review by him of his tariff. [101343]

Mr. Boateng: As at 30 November 1999, there were 94 people in custody in England and Wales convicted of murder who had submitted representations about the tariff set in their case and who were awaiting a decision by the Secretary of State.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department since 1983, in how many cases of people convicted of murder the tariff was set at less than 20 years; and what, in each case, was the reason for a tariff being set at less than 20 years. [101342]

Mr. Boateng: Tariffs of 20 years or more are reserved for the gravest types of murder including, for example, terrorist murders, murder by firearm in the course of robbery, the murder of police or prison officers and the sexual or sadistic murder of children. The great majority of murders do not fall into any of the gravest categories and the tariffs they attract are, therefore, normally less than 20 years. About 88 per cent. of all those convicted of murder and currently serving their sentence in custody in England and Wales have a tariff of less than 20 years.

2 Marsham Street

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the annual cost is of maintaining the blocks at 2 Marsham Street. [101153]

Mr. Straw: My Department took responsibility for the maintenance of 2 Marsham Street on 1 April 1999, as part of the Home Office Central London Accommodation Strategy. The budgeted cost of maintenance for the year to 31 March 2000 is £640,000 excluding Value Added Tax.

Most of this expenditure is related to health and safety issues.

A Winter Shelter under the Rough Sleepers Initiative is currently operating from 2 Marsham Street until 7 April 2000.

Chelmsford Prison

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the prescribed maximum capacity of Chelmsford Prison; and how many prisoners were held at the prison on the latest date for which information is available. [100713]

Mr. Boateng: On 1 December 1999, the operational capacity of Chelmsford prison was 469 places, and the number of prisoners held was 426.

Essex Constabulary

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* police officers, *(b)* constables and *(c)* civilian staff there are in the Essex constabulary; and what the equivalent numbers were for the two previous years. [101412]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on police numbers is collected twice a year (March and September). The figures for September 1999 are not yet available. The information requested for each year since 1997 are set out in the table.

Year (as at 31 March)	*Police Officers*	*Constables*	*Civilian support staff*
1997	2,961	2,269	1,199
1998	2,929	2,264	1,253
1999	2,891	2,215	1,273

Porton Down

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost to date of the investigation by Wiltshire Constabulary into the Chemical and Biological Defence establishment at Porton Down; and how many *(a)* police officers and *(b)* civilians are employed on it. [99703]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The total costs to date are estimated at £80,000 as of 24 November. This figure includes all salaries, overtime, subsistence, travel, accommodation and purchase of additional computer and other equipment.

A total of 13 police officers (three on a part-time basis) and two civilian support staff are employed on the investigation.

Police (Disciplinary Notices)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the officer heading the Operation Waller inquiry into Cleveland Police has issued Regulation 6 disciplinary notices concerning senior police officers; and if he will make a statement. [101421]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Cleveland Police Authority has not appointed an investigating officer to investigate its senior officers, so the question of Regulation 6 notices has not arisen.

Rural Policing

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many additional police officers will be required in each of the rural counties referred to in the report prepared by ORH Ltd.; [101173]

(2) if he will place in the Library the report prepared by ORH Ltd. relating to the provision of police forces in rural areas; [101171]

(3) if he will make a statement on the report prepared by ORH Ltd. relating to the provision of police forces in rural areas. [101172]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to a Question from the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 182–83W.

A copy of the Operational Research in Health Ltd. (ORH) report on the cost of providing policing services in sparsely populated rural areas, and a copy of the report's executive summary, is available in the Library.

The findings of the report were considered by a Home Office chaired Working Group—which included representatives of the police service, police authorities and local authorities—in July. There was no single view within the Working Group on the conclusions of the research report. There was general agreement that a sparsity factor had been detected, but less agreement about how to include it appropriately in the police funding formula.

In announcing funding allocations for police authorities for 2000–01, we set considerable store by stability in the grant system to help police authorities plan ahead. In the July 1998 White Paper, "Modern Local Government—In Touch with the People", the Deputy Prime Minister said that we would not expect to make fresh changes to the method of calculation of Standard Spending Assessments (SSAs) whilst a fundamental review of the SSA system across local government is conducted. This applies equally to police grant, as a common formula is used for distribution of police grant and SSA.

Our present intention is that, subject to consultation and approval by the House, we shall not make any changes to the method of police grant distribution for 2000–01. We do not, therefore, propose to make any substantive changes to the operation of the police funding formula for next year. Rural police forces will continue to benefit from the existing 'sparsity' element in the funding formula.

The research report made recommendations in respect of changes to the police funding formula. There were no specific recommendations in relation to police officer numbers in the rural forces. The powers for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to set police establishment levels for each force were removed under the Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994. It is for chief officers of police to determine staffing requirements within the overall resources available. However, the new ring-fenced Crime Fighting Fund will enable the police to recruit 5,000 officers, over and above the number forces would otherwise have recruited over the next three years, commencing April 2000. Rural police forces will be able to apply for a share of this funding.

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if the conclusions of his Department's report on rural policing were taken into account in his recent allocation of funding to police authorities in England; and if he will make a statement; [101169]

(2) when he received the report on policing in rural areas; and when he intends to publish its conclusions. [101170]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given to a Question from the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 182–83W.

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The Home Office received the final report on the cost of providing police services in rural areas from the researchers on 6 May 1999, following which an executive summary of the report's conclusions were commissioned. The full report and executive summary were presented to a Home Office chaired Working Group, which included police representatives, on 8 July. The executive summary was sent to all police authorities in England and Wales on 21 July. A copy of the full report and the executive summary are available in the Library.

Ruth Ellis

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the death penalty on Ruth Ellis; and if he will arrange for further investigation by his Department. [101217]

Mr. Straw: Ruth Ellis was convicted of murder in 1955, for which the death sentence was mandatory. No appeal was lodged. The Home Secretary of the day concluded that there were insufficient grounds to justify the sentence not being carried out. The powers of the Home Secretary to refer alleged miscarriages of justice to the Court of Appeal were replaced in 1997 by new powers vested in the Criminal Cases Review Commission, which is now responsible for the investigation of cases of alleged wrongful conviction. I understand that an application for a review of Ruth Ellis's case has recently been submitted to the Commission. It will be for the Commission to decide in due course whether the case should be referred to the Court of Appeal.

Target Setting

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many targets have been agreed between his Department and (i) local authorities and (ii) other bodies apart from his own agencies and non-departmental bodies since May 1997. [99476]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* A very wide range of targets set by the Home Office impact, to varying degrees, upon local authorities and other bodies. The precise information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Examples of areas of activity for which such targets have been introduced since May 1997 include: reduction in the level of vehicle crime; reduction in the number of police officers taking medical retirement; and the recruitment, retention and progression of ethnic minority officers in the fire service, the police service and the probation services. Details of the ethnic minority employment targets are available in "Race Equality—the Home Secretary's Employment Targets. Staff targets for the Home Office, the Prison Service, the Police, the Fire and the Probation Services", published by the Home Office on 28 July 1999. A copy has been placed in the Library.

CABINET OFFICE

Modernising Government Action Plan

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made on the corporate IT strategy framework documents promised in the Modernising Government Action Plan. [101687]

Mr. Ian McCartney: In the Modernising Government Action Plan we are committed to publishing a corporate IT strategy for government in March 2000. I am now able to announce that I have published, as part of that strategy, a framework document on Call Centres. This document provides the public sector with guidelines on the issues they need to consider when using call centres, such as standards and accessibility. Over the next month I will be publishing further framework documents covering websites, smart cards, authentication and digital TV. I have arranged for copies of these frameworks to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

DOE Building, Marsham Street

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she intends to demolish the former Department of the Environment building in Marsham Street, SW1. [100907]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. John Locke, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John C. Locke to Mr. Edward Leigh, dated 6 December:

The Minister of State for the Cabinet Office, Ian McCartney, has asked me as Chief Executive of Property Advisers to the Civil Estate (PACE) to respond to your Parliamentary Question about the demolition of 2 Marsham Street.

It remains our intention to demolish 2 Marsham Street as soon as practicable. You may be aware that, in connection with its Headquarters PFI project, the Home Office has made the property available to its bidders to consider as one of their options.

A decision by Home Office is now expected in late Spring next year. Pending this decision, Home Office has assumed management responsibility and is paying the holding costs of the property.

Public Bodies

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many non-departmental public bodies have been *(a)* established and *(b)* abolished since 2 May 1997. [100892]

Mr. Stringer: Data on numbers of non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) are collated on a financial year basis and published annually in the publication "Public Bodies", copies of which are available in both Libraries of the House. "Public Bodies 1998" reported a net reduction of 55 NDPBs on the previous year. "Public Bodies 1999", which is due to be published later this month, is likely to show a further reduction in NDPBs.

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office which non-departmental public bodies were *(a)* established and *(b)* abolished in (i) 1998 and (ii) 1999. [100622]

Mr. Stringer: The following lists all the non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) that have been abolished or created in the financial years 1997–98 and 1998–99. The publication "Public Bodies 1998", which is available in both Libraries of the House, provides comprehensive information on each NDPB. "Public Bodies 1999" is due to be published later this month.

Abolished

Executive

British Board of Agrément
Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research
Countryside Commission
Development Board for Rural Wales
Education Assets Board
Land Authority for Wales
Monopolies and Mergers Commission
North Hull Housing Action Trust
Residuary Body for Wales
School Curriculum and Assessment Authority
Scottish Community Education Council
Scottish Seed Potato Development Council
Tai Cymru
UK Ecolabelling Board
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum
Ulster Museum
Urban Development Corporations x 9

Advisory

Advisory Committee on Coal Research
Advisory Committee on Dental Establishments
Advisory Committee on Design Quality in the NHS
Advisory Committee on Joint Environmental Markets
Advisory Committee on Plant and Machinery
Advisory Committee on Service Candidates
Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales
Assessment Panel for Construction Research
Aviation Committee
Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research
Citizens Charter Panel of Advisers
Consultative Panel on Badgers and Bovine TB
County Court Rule Committee
Crime Prevention Agency
Dartmoor Working Party (formerly part of the Dartmoor

Steering Group)
Defence Scientific Advisory Council (sub-committees) x 5
Deregulation Task Force
Health and Safety Agency for Northern Ireland
Local Government Property Commission for Scotland
Local Government Staff Commission (England)
Microbiology Advisory Committee
National Advisory Council for the Employment of People with Disabilities
Northern Ireland Citizen's Charter Advisory Panel
Nuclear Powered Warships Safety Committee
Nuclear Weapons Safety Committee
Overseas Project Board
Race Relations Employment Advisory Group
Regional Panels in MAFF x 9
Residuary Body for Wales
Royal Commission on Long Term Care of the Elderly
Scottish Agricultural Consultative Panel
Scottish Crime Prevention Council
Scottish Economic Council
Scottish Studentship Selection Committee
Secretary of State for Scotland's Advisory Group on Sustainable Development
Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights (NI)
Standing Committee on Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education
Statistics Advisory Committee
Sugar Beet Research and Education Committee
Supported Employment Consultative Group
Supreme Court Rule Committee
Teaching Company Scheme Board
Treasure Trove Reviewing Committee
Welsh Advisory Committee on Drug and Alcohol Misuse
Welsh Council for Post Graduate Medical and Dental Education

Tribunals NDPBs

Scheme of Compensation for Loss of Earnings through Civil Unrest (NI)

[1] Include NDPBs which have been reclassified e. g. those moved to the private sector

Created

Executive

British Potato Council
Commission for Racial Equality for Northern Ireland
Community Learning Scotland
Competition Commission
Countryside Agency
Docklands Light Railway
Education Transfer Council
English Tourism Council
Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland
Historic Royal Palaces
National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts
National Lottery Commission
National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland
New Opportunities Fund
NI Human Rights Commission
Police Information Technology Organisation
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
Regional Development Agencies x 8
Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission
Scottish Further Education Funding Council
Youth Justice Board for England and Wales

Advisory

Advisory Committee for Disabled People in Employment and Training
Advisory Committee on Animal Feedingstuffs
Advisory Committee on Consumer Products and the Environment
Advisory Committee on Lifelong Learning Targets
Aerospace Committee
Better Regulation Task Force
Civil Justice Council
Civil Procedure Rule Committee
Commission for Integrated Transport
Committee on Chemicals and Materials and Construction for use in Public Water Supplies and Swimming Pools
Defence Nuclear Safety Committee
Development Awareness Working Group
Expert Group on Airborne Particles
Expert Group on Cryptosporidium in Water Supplies
Expert Group on Vitamins and Minerals
Expert Panel on Sustainable Development Education
Football Task Force
Genetics and Insurance Committee
Low Pay Commission
New Deal Task Force
People's Panel Advisory Group
Race in Employment and Education Forum
Race Relations Forum
Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly
Scottish Advisory Committee on Distinction Awards
Scottish Childcare Board
Security Vetting Appeals Panel
Sentencing Advisory Panel
Skills Task Force
Spectrum Management Advisory Group
Treasure Valuation Committee
Zoos Forum

Tribunal

Office of the Surveillance Commissioners
Registered Nursery Education Inspectors Appeal Tribunal

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Unmarried Fathers

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to seek to amend the law to provide unmarried fathers with the same right of parental responsibility as married fathers; and if he will make a statement. [101085]

Jane Kennedy: The Government intend to introduce an amendment to the Children Act 1989 that unmarried fathers who sign their child's birth certificate jointly with the mother will acquire parental responsibility without further formality. This provision will be introduced when parliamentary time allows.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the

date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100156]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department has awarded 37 research contracts since May 1997 with a total overall spend of £1,003,776; details of these, including the cost of each contract are provided in the table. None of the projects was subject to a specific veto on publication of results or control over date of publication. A standard clause in research contracts is that

> "the contractor shall always consider any representation from the Contract Manager for the revision of any publication, interim or final, of the results".

The Department retains the right to insert a disclaimer in published reports.

LCD research projects contracted since May 1997

Project Title	*Cost £*	*Date completed*	*Researcher details*
Regulating Legal Services	9,000	August 1997	Robert Baldwin—London School of Economics
The Use of Judicial Appointment Commissions: A Review of the US and Canadian Models	2,250	August 1997	Kate Malleson—London School of Economics
Judicial Appointments in Continental Europe	8,400	August 1997	Cheryl Thomas—Wolfson College, Oxford University
Review of the Court of Appeal	12,602	August 1997	Joyce Plotnikoff and Richard Woolfson—Consultants in Management, IT and the Law
Contracting for civil litigation: modelling volumes, access and regional distributions for certified non-matrimonial civil legal aid	1,800	September 1997	Tamara Goriely—TPR Social and Legal Research
The Division of Marital Assets Following Divorce With Particular Reference to Pensions	4,900	October 1997	Antony Dnes—University of Hertfordshire
Contracting For Legal Services With Different Cost Rules	6,200	March 1998	Gwyn Bevan—London School of Economics and Political Science Paul Fenn—University of Nottingham Neil Rickman—University of Surrey
Costing Fast Track Procedures Through Hypothetical Case Studies	96,000	March 1998	Tamara Goriely, Farah Butt and Avrom Sherr—Institute of Advanced Legal Studies
Review Papers on Marriage—causes, and ways of preventing marital breakdown	79,150	March 1998	One plus One
Economic Impact of Law on Ancillary Relief	4,000	April 1998	Antony Dnes—University of Hertfordshire
Court Customer Needs	4,200	July 1998	Sarah Beinart (Independent consultant)
Empirical Analysis of Standard Fees in Magistrates' Courts	6,000	July 1998	Paul Fenn—University of Nottingham
Government Policies and Lawyers' Roles	11,075	September 1998	Phillip Lewis—Wolfson College, Oxford University
Ancillary Relief Pilot Scheme	206,703	September 1998	KPMG
Economic Impact of the Quality of Legal Machinery	2,500	October 1998	Alice Belcher—University of Dundee
Fast Track Simulation Pilot	31,386	December 1998	John Peysner—Nottingham Trent University
Criminal Justice Reform and the Organisation of Criminal Defence Services	15,200	June 1998	Lee Bridges—University of Warwick
Toward a Civil Justice Audit	32,168	June 1998	Joanna Shapland—University of Sheffield
Study of the services to litigants in person provided by the Citizens' Advice Bureau in the Royal Courts of Justice	10,693	June 1998	Joyce Plotnikoff and Richard Woolfson—Consultants in Management, IT and the Law
Impact of legal aid on litigants behaviour: an empirical analysis	43,800	January 1999	Paul Fenn—University of Nottingham Alastair Gray—Wolfson College, Oxford University Neil Rickman—University of Surrey
Regional study of local authority and court processes in homelessness cases	30,989	March 1999	Trevor Buck—University of Leicester
Civil legal aid for children: a mapping exercise	24,654	March 1999	Judith Masson—University of Warwick
ADR in the Court of Appeal—Preliminary Work	5,000	March 1998	Hazel Genn—University College London
Applicability to other tribunals and court jurisdictions of principals/practice in the London Parking Appeals Service	25,246	April 1999	John Raine—University of Birmingham
Professionalising Lay Justice: Effective Clerking in Family Proceedings	39,507	July 1999	Joan Hunt—Wolfson College, Oxford University
County court baseline data	52,361	May 1999	Hazel Genn—University College London
Alternative Dispute Resolution in Commercial Cases	14,500	September 1999	Hazel Genn—University College London
New public management and the administration of justice in the magistrates' court	25,000	December 1999	Ben Fitzpatrick—Leeds University
Community Legal Service: Developing joined-up solutions	19,500	January 1999	Jane Steele
Legal Aid and the Human Rights Act 1998	26,507	May 1999	Richard Moorehead—Institute of Advanced Legal Studies and Claire Brown—Independent consultant
Cross-jurisdictional issues in case management	12,500	'April 2000	Joyce Plotnikoff and Richard Woolfson—Consultants in Management, IT and the Law

LCD research projects contracted since May 1997

Project Title	*Cost £*	*Date completed*	*Researcher details*
Factors affecting the decision to apply for Silk/Judicial Office	9,652	[1]April 2000	Kate Malleson—London School of Economics Fareda Banda—School of Oriental and African Studies
Community Legal Service: Pioneer Community Legal Service Partnerships	33,779	[1]December 1999	Richard Moorehead—Institute of Advanced Legal Studies
Finalising the civil justice audit	25,377	[1]April 2000	Joanne Shapland—University of Sheffield
Ancillary Relief Pilot Study	11,177	[1]December 1999	Gwynn Davis—University of Bristol
Study on Lay and Stipendiary Magistrates	60,000	[2]—	Rod Morgan—University of Bristol and Taylor Nelson Sofres—Consultants
Total	1,003,776		

[1] Anticipated completion date
[2] To be determined

In addition £18,853 was contributed (1998–99 financial year) to a study entitled "Baseline Customer Research" commissioned by the Legal Services Ombudsman. The study was run by Customer Management Consultancy Ltd. and the resulting data were published in a Summary of Findings and Recommendations by the Legal Services Ombudsman in March 1999.

Immigration and Asylum

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will publish the names and addresses of the solicitors' firms and other agencies which have been awarded block contracts by the Legal Aid Board to give advice, assistance and representation in immigration and asylum cases. [101295]

Mr. Lock: The Legal Aid Board has only recently offered contracts in immigration and asylum work to solicitors and other agencies and the exact number of contracted providers will not be known until the end of December 1999. Almost 500 contracts have been offered and the Board expects a high proportion of them to be taken up. From January 2000, the Board will be able to provide information on those contracted to do immigration and asylum work. It would not be right to publish the names and addresses of firms and agencies who have been offered contracts, but who have not yet decided to accept them, because to do so would be breaking the commercial confidentiality held between the Board and the suppliers. The names and addresses of those solicitors firms and other agencies awarded contracts will be placed in the Library in January 2000 and will also be set out in the Community Legal Service Directory. The Directory is expected to be published in April 2000.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Antartic Environmental Treaty

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress is being made towards ratification of the Antarctic Environmental Treaty; and if he will make a statement. [100806]

Mr. Hain: The Environmental Protocol to the Antartic Treaty and its Annex I to IV entered into force on 14 January 1998. The United Kingdom's instrument of ratification of the Protocol was deposited on 25 April 1995. To give effect to the Protocol in UK law, the various Sections of the Antartic Act (1994) were brought into force between 1 November 1995 and 14 January 1998.

The fifth Annex to the Protocol, dealing with the Antartic protected areas system, is anticipated to enter into force in 2000, following approval by four remaining Antartic Treaty Parties. The UK approved V Annex in May 1996.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what actions he has taken to promote a peace process in Sri Lanka; and if he will make a statement. [100802]

Mr. Hain: We believe a lasting solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka can only be reached through a political settlement. We have made clear that we stand ready to help in the resolution of the conflict if both sides ask us to play a role.

Burma

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Government of Burma regarding *(a)* human rights, *(b)* religious freedom and *(c)* the detention of James Mawdsley. [100712]

Mr. Battle: Our Ambassador in Rangoon frequently raises our concerns with the Burmese authorities about human rights, including religious freedom, most recently with the Burmese Foreign Minister on 16 November. The UK also co-sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution adopted on 19 November, condemning the human rights violations and urging the Burmese regime to ensure full respect for all human rights and fundamental freedom. Our Ambassador in Rangoon, accompanied by Mrs. Mawdsley, visited James in prison on 20 November and remains in close touch with the Burmese authorities on his case.

Chechnya

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he raised matters relating to the Russian military activity in Chechnya and

compliance with the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and additional protocols of 1977 at the OSCE Istanbul summit; and if he will make a statement. [100837]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has raised our concerns on Chechnya with Foreign Minister Ivanov, including at the OSCE Istanbul summit. We and our EU partners have reminded all parties to the conflict of the necessity to observe international humanitarian law.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Russian authorities over the invasion of Chechnya; and if he will make a statement. [101193]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has had regular discussions with Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov, most recently in a telephone conversation on 3 December, urging that Russia should seek a negotiated political settlement to the conflict. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has also written to the Russian President and Prime Minister underlining our concerns.

EU Policy (Northern Dimension)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the development of a Northern Dimension in EU policy; what areas are covered; what policies are concerned; and what budgets are involved. [101003]

Mr. Vaz: The development of a Northern Dimension to EU policy has progressed under the Finnish Presidency. I attended a conference in Helsinki on 16 November. The Commission are now drafting an Action Plan. Key policy areas concerned are energy, environment, nuclear safety, transport and cross-border co-operation. Activities will be financed through the EU PHARE, TACIS and INTERREG programmes.

Death Penalty

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what *(a)* national and *(b)* EU programmes are in progress to encourage states to abolish the death penalty. [101007]

Mr. Hain: The United Kingdom opposes the death penalty in all circumstances. Together with EU partners, we regularly call upon all states to abolish it. Where the death penalty is retained, we urge states to apply it only for the most serious crimes and to observe international minimum standards such as the non-execution of minors, pregnant women or the insane.

The UK, along with its EU partners, regularly carries out demarches in a number of countries including most recently, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, the USA, Iran, Ukraine, the Philippines and Uganda.

Council of Ministers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future role of the Deputy Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers. [101005]

Mr. Vaz: The Deputy Secretary-General will be responsible for the day to day running of the Council Secretariat and supporting the Secretary-General as appropriate.

EU Stability Pact

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will make a statement on the development of a European Union Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe; what finances are involved; which Directorate-Generals are involved; which countries are concerned; what is the purpose of this agreement; what representations he has received from concerned parties; and what Common Financial and Security Policy considerations are covered; [101011]

(2) what staff will be required for the European Union Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe; at what cost; what nationalities will be eligible to join; and from which institutions the Special Co-ordinator will be chosen. [101012]

Mr. Vaz: The founding document of the Stability Pact for South-East Europe places the pact under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The Special Co-ordinator for the Stability Pact (Bodo Hombach) was appointed by the European Union, after consultation with OSCE Chairman in Office and other Pact participants.

The Office of the Special Co-ordinator is in Brussels. The Office currently has 29 staff, many secondees from participant countries (including the UK). We anticipate that the UK's contribution to cover the costs of the inaugural Summit meeting of the Stability Pact, and the costs incurred in supporting the EU's Special Representative for the Stability Pact until 31 December 1999, will be approximately £225,000.

The Pact brings together the countries of the region, the EU, the USA, Russia, a range of other countries, many international organisations and International Financial institutions. It has been stressed at all Stability Pact meetings that there is a role for FRY when conditions permit. Meanwhile, Montenegro is fully involved in the Pact's work.

The Pact aims to promote peace, stability and democracy in the region. The EU plays a leading role in the Pact. But other international organisations and the IFIs also have a critical role to play. The Pact's strength is as a catalysing and co-ordinating organisation. It is not intended to be a grant-giving body. We will continue to support the implementing agencies (EU, OSCE, IFIs, etc.) through our regular contributions and on a case-by-case basis.

The UK has played an active role in the first meetings of the Regional Table and three Working Tables (covering Democracy/Human Rights, Economic Reconstruction/ Development/Co-operation and Security Issues). These and other meetings and regular bilateral contacts enable us to have a full exchange of views with all Pact participants and the Special Co-ordinator on all aspects of the Stability Pact process.

There was an informal meeting of Stability Pact Foreign Ministers in the margins of the OSCE Summit in Istanbul on 18 November. This provided a useful stock-taking opportunity. Overall progress has been good.

But the Stability Pact has been in existence for less than six months and although early wins are important, sustainable progress in the long-term is the real prize.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason the Charter of Fundamental Rights will identify those rights pertaining solely to EU citizens; and what voting procedure will pass the final document. [101004]

Mr. Vaz: The reference in the Cologne Conclusions on rights pertaining to EU citizens is designed to make the Charter an effective showcase of existing EU rights.

The decision-making process in the Charter drafting body is consensus-based. The Cologne Conclusions state that the European Council will propose to the European Parliament and the Commission that, together with the Council, they should solemnly proclaim a European Charter of Fundamental Rights on the basis of the draft document.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the proposals under discussion for the establishment of an EU agency for human rights and democracy; what is the relevant treaty base; if such will fall under the remit of the Common Foreign and Security Policy; and what timescale is envisaged. [101010]

Mr. Hain: In the Vienna Declaration of 10 December 1998, the EU undertook to consider various ways of strengthening its human rights structures. This year's Cologne Council suggested that the advisability of setting up an Agency for Human Rights and Democracy should be considered. We would give careful thought to any such proposal, including how an Agency would fit with existing Common Foreign and Security Policy mechanisms.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the types of rights planned for inclusion into an EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. [101009]

Mr. Vaz: The Charter drafting body has yet to start work. Its first meeting is on 17 December. But the Cologne Conclusions provide some indications of the ground that might be covered. We believe that the Charter should make it easier for EU citizens to know the civil and political rights which they already enjoy under the Treaties.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department first received reports of moves by other EU Governments to propose an EU Charter of Fundamental Rights; and from what initial source. [101006]

Mr. Vaz: There was a specific reference to work on an EU Charter of Rights in the German Presidency Work Programme produced at the turn of the year.

European Security Charter

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the incorporation of Russia into elements of the European Security Charter. [101008]

Mr. Vaz: Like other OSCE participating states, the Russian Federation signed the European Security Charter at the OSCE Summit in Istanbul on 18–19 November 1999. The Charter, which as well as confirming participating states' adherence to previous OSCE commitments sets out principles for future security co-operation in Europe, was the result of lengthy negotiations amongst OSCE participating states, including Russia.

British Deaths (Nigeria)

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of procedures used by British High Commission staff to obtain police reports on the deaths of British citizens in Nigeria. [101363]

Mr. Hain: I am satisfied that the British High Commission in Abuja and the British Deputy High Commission in Lagos do all they properly can to obtain police reports on the deaths of British citizens in Nigeria.

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the occasions when British High Commission staff have met representatives of the Nigerian Government to ask for a copy of the complete police report on the death of Mr. Mark Davey. [101362]

Mr. Hain: British High Commission staff met representatives of the Nigerian Government on the following occasions:

15, 18 and 29 May 1998;
4 August 1998;
27 August 1998;
27 October 1998;
5 March 1999;
8 April 1999;
12 April 1999; and
21 September 1999

In addition, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Permanent Under-Secretary and Head of the Diplomatic Service raised the issue with the Permanent Secretary at the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 16 February 1999.

The British High Commission has reminded the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on numerous occasions that a copy of the report has not been forthcoming. They have written to officials and Ministers on five occasions and sent Diplomatic notes to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on a further five occasions. I look for opportunities to raise this matter when I visit Nigeria early next year.

The British High Commission will continue to press the Nigerian authorities for a copy of the report.

Torture

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which member countries of the OSCE have failed to eradicate torture and cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment. [101366]

Mr. Vaz: The issue of torture was discussed at the Human Dimension session of the OSCE Review Conference in Istanbul on 9 November. It was noted that, while torture is prohibited in all OSCE participating states, instances of abuse persist in many parts of the

region. No state should be complacent. Eradication of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment is a constant process, requiring in particular effective human rights protection for detainees and investigation and punishment of offences.

The Government are funding work by the OSCE to address these issues, for example the production of a handbook on combating torture.

Indonesia

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Indonesia about wildlife conservation, with particular reference to orang-utans and Tanjung Puting National Park; and if he will make a statement. [99675]

Mr. Hain: The Government are concerned that forest degradation, including illegal logging in Indonesia and elsewhere, represents a critical threat to the survival of many species including orang-utans. Officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and other Government departments are in frequent touch with the Indonesian authorities on forest issues. The Government are working with other countries and international institutions to encourage Indonesia urgently to put in place systems to ensure the sustainable management of forests, and the protection of forest habitats. The Department for International Development appointed a Forestry Adviser to Indonesia in January 1999, who is working closely to this end with the Government of Indonesia and local communities.

Kosovo

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in Kosovo; and how long he estimates UK troops will remain there. [101330]

Mr. Vaz: The situation in Kosovo has been transformed in the six months since the deployment of KFOR on 12 July.

KFOR has robust presence throughout Kosovo. The Serbian VJ and MUP forces have withdrawn and their reign of terror and repression has ended. The KLA have been demilitarised. But problems remain. KFOR are having to devote 50 per cent. of their manpower to the protection of minorities, with a permanent presence in Serb communities. Some 1,800 UNMIK police have been deployed covering 60 per cent. of Kosovo but further resources are needed. The murder rate has fallen but crime and violence remain too high. The UK is working with EU partners to help the UN Mission (UNMIK) more effectively to tackle organised crime.

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the proposed export of smoke and incendiary grenades to the Norwegian KFOR contingent in Kosovo; and what assessment he has made of its compatibility with the UN and EU arms embargoes in place in the former Republic of Yugoslavia. [101732]

Mr. Vaz: We have granted a licence for the export to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) of 2,000 incendiary hand grenades and 6,000 coloured smoke grenades for use in de-mining activities by the Norwegian KFOR contingent deployed in Kosovo. These goods are on the UK's military List.

UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1160 imposed an arms embargo on the FRY. The only exception to this embargo is that UNSCR 1244 provides that prohibitions imposed by UNSCR 1160 shall not apply to the sale or supply of arms and related material for the use of the international civil and security presences in Kosovo. Equipment needed for de-mining activities is not covered by the EU arms embargo.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which of his current foreign policy objectives are aided by the ECGD. [101486]

Mr. Hain: ECGD aids the following foreign policy objectives:

Objective 2:

To improve, through international action, economic opportunities for a prosperous UK.

Objective 3:

To improve quality of life worldwide; and develop a strong international community.

Objective 4:

To increase the impact and respect for British foreign policy and values.

Objective 5:

To ensure the UK plays a strong role in a strong Europe, responsive to people's needs.

UN Security Council resolution 1244 established UNMIK and KFOR for an initial deployment of 12 months, to continue thereafter unless the Security Council decided otherwise. We believe the international presence should remain in Kosovo for as long as is necessary to ensure a secure environment for the people of Kosovo to live in peace.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contribution the ECGD makes to Britain's foreign policy objectives. [101485]

Mr. Hain: ECGD contributes to Britain's foreign policy *Objective 2* (to improve, through international action, economic opportunities for a prosperous UK) by promoting an safeguarding UK trade and outward investment, and other economic, financial and technological interests overseas; and by developing and implementing arrangements to further free, fair and sustainable trade and economic relations. *Objective 3* (to improve quality of life worldwide; and develop a strong international community) is assisted by ECGD encouraging growth and development through out the world; and by international action to protect the environment.

Objective 4 (to increase the impact and respect for British foreign policy and values) is contributed to by ECGD's involvement in multilateral bodies, such as the OECD and Paris Club, and through multilateral and bilateral debt, and debt relief initiatives; by ensuring that international considerations inform government policy-making; and by providing a response to the

concerns of Parliament, the public, and the media. *Objective 5* is supported (to ensure the UK plays a strong role in a strong Europe, responding to people's needs) by ECGD's involvement in promoting effective EU external policies in the field of export credits.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how nuclear test is defined in the context of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; what the source is of the definition; and if he will make a statement. [101387]

Mr. Hain: The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty does not set out a definition of a nuclear test. The obligations of parties to the Treaty are contained in Article I. These obligations are not to carry out any nuclear weapons test explosion or any other nuclear explosion, and to prohibit and prevent any such nuclear explosion at any place under its jurisdiction or control. State parties also undertake to refrain from causing, encouraging, or in any way participating in the carrying out of any nuclear weapon test explosion or any other nuclear explosion.

These obligations where drawn up in the course of the treaty negotiations.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty following the failure of the United States Senate to ratify the Treaty. [101389]

Mr. Hain: We have made clear our deep disappointment with the US Senate's vote against ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. We will continue to work with the US Administration, and with other key countries, to bring the Treaty into force as soon as possible.

Russia

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what *(a)* UK bilateral and *(b)* NATO financial assistance is being (i) offered and (ii) provided to Russia in relation to (1) decommissioning redundant nuclear weapons and delivery systems, (2) destruction of chemical weapons and (3) other arms control systems; and if he will make a statement. [101384]

Mr. Hain: The UK has provided £35,900,000 in bilateral assistance to support the decommissioning of redundant nuclear weapons. This figure comprises £35 million for equipment to transfer warheads from the Former Soviet Union to Russia between 1992–95 and approximately £900,000 assistance on safeguards and materials accountancy. We have also announced a £5 million bilateral assistance programme to help Russia deal with its nuclear waste and spent fuel legacy. Specific projects are now being considered, but, before we can initiate projects on the ground, we need an adequate legal and financial framework for such assistance. This is under negotiation.

NATO does not provide financial assistance in these areas. At the Washington Summit this year, NATO said that it would consider options for confidence and security-building measures, verification, non-proliferation and arms control and disarmament. The Council in Permanent Session will propose a process to Ministers this month for considering such options.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced on 24 November that nuclear safety in the Former Soviet Union would be the subject of cross departmental study in the 2000 Cross-cutting review. The UK is also contributing to ongoing discussions in the EU on a "Joint Action Establishing a European Union Co-operation Programme for Non-proliferation and Disarmament in the Russian Federation."

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the high-level parliamentary visits planned this year to Russia, referred to at paragraph 19 of the paper dated 6 October prepared by his Department and supplied to the Foreign Affairs Committee. [101386]

Mr. Vaz: I refer my hon. Friend to the annexe of Parliamentary visits attached to the supplementary Memorandum submitted to the Foreign Affairs Committee on 2 December. The list of visits for 1999 is as follows:

Parliamentary Visits 1999

January

Ivan Rybkin, President Yeltsin's personal envoy to CIS, plus seven deputies for seminar on standards in public life, organised by Leeds University.

March

Nine MPs, House of Commons Defence Committee.

April

Alexander Shokhin, Chairman of Duma faction of "Our Home is Russia" Party, plus four deputies to London and regions.

North Atlantic Assembly delegation to Moscow.

Five Deputies, Duma Budget Committee (tax sub-committee).

May

Alexander Zhukov, Chairman, Duma Budget Committee plus four deputies Terry Davis, MP (as candidate for Secretary General Council of Europe).

June

Six deputies, Duma Budget Committee (tax sub-committee)'.

Three deputies, Duma Budget Committee (tax sub-committee)'.

Five deputies, Duma Information Policy Committee Nikolai Stolyarov, Deputy Chairman, Duma Foreign Affairs Committee plus four deputies.

Four Deputies, Duma Veterans Committee.

Nineteen deputies to UK for election study visit.

Five MPs to Moscow and Regions.

Six MPs to Moscow, for discussions on Kosovo.

Two deputies to UK (in group of Ministry of Labour officials and NGO representatives).

July

Vladimir Lukin, Chairman, Duma Foreign Affairs Committee, for opening of Scottish Parliament.

Nikolai Stolyarov, Deputy Chairman, Duma Foreign Affairs Committee for Inter-parliamentary seminar on security issues.

September

Lord Cromwell and Dr. Michael Clark, MP to Moscow, for meetings on democracy and governance.

Two Duma deputies, Ivan Rybkin and Viktor Sheinis, for a seminar on media and elections campaigns.

October

Eight MPs from the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, to Moscow, St. Petersburg and Ekaterinburg.

November

Andrew Tyrie, MP to Moscow, for meetings on human rights issues.

' Separate visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reasons the United Kingdom made representations to the Russian Government about the prosecution of the journalists Nikitin and Pasko; and if he will make a statement. [101383]

Mr. Vaz: We, along with our EU partners, have been concerned that the trials of the environmentalists Nikitin and Pasko should be conducted fairly, justly and in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights. We will continue to monitor both cases.

Russia (QMV)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason qualified majority voting has been introduced into the Common EU strategy on Russia; what was his policy on its introduction; what decisions henceforth will no longer be subject to unanimity; what decisions have been taken under the new procedure; and what is the procedure for restoring the unanimity principle. [101013]

Mr. Vaz: The Treaty on European Union, as amended by the Treaty of Amsterdam, which entered into force on 1 May 1999, provides for the European Council to decide on common strategies unanimously. It also provides for the Council to act by qualified majority when adopting joint actions, common positions, or taking any other decisions on the basis of a common strategy. If a member of the Council declares that it intends for important and stated reasons of national interest to oppose the adoption of a decision to be taken by qualified majority, a vote shall not be taken. The Council may, acting by qualified majority, request that the matter be referred to the European Council for decision by unanimity. No actions have yet been taken on the basis of the common strategy on Russia by qualified majority. We support the new arrangements for the common foreign and security policy put in place by the Treaty of Amsterdam.

Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the extent to which the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty has been *(a)* ratified and *(b)* implemented by the relevant states. [101385]

Mr. Vaz: *(a)* The Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty was ratified by all 30 States and entered into force in July 1992. The adapted CFE Treaty was signed in Istanbul on 19 November 1999. The adapted Treaty will not come into force until all 30 signatories have ratified. This could take some time. In the interim period, the original CFE Treaty remains in force.

(b) While there have been a number of examples of non-compliance, implementation since the Treaty came into force has generally been good. We and our NATO Allies continue to press for full compliance, and have made clear that our ratification of the adapted Treaty will depend upon the level of all Parties' compliance with limits that have been agreed.

State Visits (Policing)

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it is standard practice for minutes not be taken of meetings held between officials of his Department and the Metropolitan Police on security matters relating to state visits. [101293]

Mr. Battle: It has not been standard practice to take minutes of such meetings.

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he or his officials have had access to minutes taken by the Metropolitan Police of meetings between his officials and the police in relation to the visit of the Chinese President. [101354]

Mr. Battle: There are no such minutes.

Siobhain McDonagh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on those detained by the police during the state visit of the President of China to the UK. [101891]

Mr. Battle: Following a further review, I am now able to give figures for arrests for activities related to the State Visit in all police areas visited by the Chinese President. As I made clear in the Debate on the Address, no-one was charged. As the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) said on 5 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 366W, 15 people were arrested in the Metropolitan Police Area. I regret that I may have implied during the Debate on the Address that there were no arrests. I can now confirm that, in addition to those above, one person was arrested in the City of London. There were no arrests in Cambridge. I reconfirm that no one was charged in any of these police areas.

Common Foreign and Security Policy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the enhancement of non-military crisis response tools within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, as established in section 56 of the Cologne Presidency Conclusions; to what extent qualified majority voting will apply; what the role will be of (i) national Governments and (ii) the Commission in their deployment; and what is his policy towards the pooling of national civil resources and expertise complementing other CFSP initiatives. [100998]

Mr. Vaz: The Presidency have carried forward the conclusions of the European Council at Cologne on non-military crisis response tools, and will present a report to the European Council at Helsinki suggesting how the Cologne conclusions may be taken further. Decisions on any new arrangements in this area will be taken by consensus. No decisions have yet been taken on the roles of the Commission or of national governments in any new coordinating arrangements. We support better coordination of the various non-military crisis response tools at the disposal of the Community and member states as a way of strengthening the European Union's common foreign and security policy.

Bilateral Visits (US)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a list of major inward and outward bilateral visits

to and from the USA since September 1998 compiled on the same basis as the annexe contained in the memorandum dated 5 October submitted by his Department to the Foreign Affairs Committee entitled "The FCO's Role in Promoting British Interests in Relations with Russia". [101388]

Mr. Battle: Once a complete list is available in the early part of next year, it will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Child Care

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for the strengthening of early years development and child care partnership plans to ensure a comprehensive network of child care provision. [98727]

Ms Hodge: My Department issued planning guidance to assist the early years development and child care partnerships to draw up their updated plans for 2000–01 in September. The guidance emphasises that plans should be working towards comprehensive coverage of child care services. Between May 1997 and end of June 1999, this Administration has created 94,316 new child care places, compared with 74,053 new places created by the out of school child care initiative in the four years between April 1993 and April 1997.

Since September, we have held a series of 14 planning guidance conferences around England attended by over 900 partnership members. As part of an extensive programme of partnership support we have also made a series of two and three day strategic planning modules available to partnerships. These modules offer workshop sessions tailor made to suit the needs of individual partnerships and give an opportunity for partners to identify detailed strategies to implement their early years development and child care plan.

The wider programme of partnership support includes publication of a series of good practice guides, the setting up of quarterly, regional partnership meetings for partnership chairs, lead officers and members, and the issue of regular newsletters and information sheets to partnership members. We are currently assessing partnership training needs and will make training packages available to them by the end of this financial year.

Nursery Places

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by local education authority the number of additional nursery school places created since May 1997. [100007]

Ms Hodge: Since September 1998, all four-year-olds have been eligible for a free early education place. Currently around 587,000, or 95 per cent., of these places are taken up.

In addition, we are making available £390 million over three years to almost double the number of three-year-olds in England able to access a free early education place. These resources will fund 190,000 new places by March 2002. From September 1999, £40 million of this new money has been allocated to the 57 local education authorities with the highest levels of social need, to create around 48,000 new, free places during 1999–2000. From April 2000, additional funding for three-year-olds will be distributed across all local education authorities, again prioritised by social need.

The table shows the number of places that we expect to be created across all authorities by 2000–01. We have yet to determine the allocation for 2001–02.

LEA	*1999–2001*
Liverpool	1,167
Manchester	563
Birmingham	6,059
Newham	1,618
Sandwell	466
Hackney	1,444
Knowsley	65
Tower Hamlets	275
Southwark	958
Lambeth	1,646
Nottingham	1,016
Greenwich	821
Newcastle upon Tyne	762
Haringey	704
Wolverhampton	100
Bradford	1,220
Sunderland	469
Leicester	1,412
Middlesbrough	57
Kingston upon Hull	460
Lewisham	1,566
Islington	1,043
Walsall	102
Salford	154
Oldham	1,086
Rochdale	900
Sheffield	2,565
Barking and Dagenham	262
Brent	1,017
Coventry	1,229
Doncaster	593
Gateshead	625
Camden	831
Blackburn with Darwen	887
Waltham Forest	1,562
South Tyneside	73
Hammersmith and Fulham	595
Hartlepool	34
Halton	544
Ealing	410
Bolton	748
Barnsley	885
Leeds	1,247
Stoke-on-Trent	439
Wandsworth	1,601
Stockton-on-Tees	66
Redcar and Cleveland	54
St. Helens	725
Rotherham	1,186
Blackpool	1,058
Wirral	1,437
Tameside	593
North Tyneside	68
Durham	301
North East Lincolnshire	629
Wakefield	581
Hounslow	584
Westminster	918
Southampton	1,579

LEA	1999–2001
Sefton	486
Derby	687
Kirklees	1,100
Kensington and Chelsea	695
Brighton and Hove	1,046
Bristol	821
Luton	1,179
Enfield	1,284
Telford and Wrekin	914
Wigan	1,339
Portsmouth	1,045
Calderdale	381
Plymouth	1,262
Croydon	884
Redbridge	913
Dudley	77
Slough	244
Isle of Wight	506
Torbay	327
Darlington	25
Cornwall	1,644
North Lincolnshire	493
Thurrock	547
Southend-on-Sea	590
Lancashire	1,871
Nottinghamshire	180
Reading	183
Northumberland	67
Bournemouth	435
Peterborough	651
Hillingdon	638
Bury	51
Trafford	54
Barnet	82
Merton	51
Medway	665
Derbyshire	176
Harrow	225
Warrington	50
Cumbria	112
Havering	78
Bexley	58
Richmond upon Thames	41
Lincolnshire	141
Swindon	122
Stockport	70
Bromley	341
Norfolk	176
City of London	1
Staffordshire	194
Herefordshire	41
Devon	150
Suffolk	563
Oxfordshire	234
Cambridgeshire	142
Cheshire	161
Kent	467
Dorset	282
Milton Keynes	61
Gloucestershire	735
Surrey	251
Bracknell Forest	89
Windsor and Maidenhead	34
Bedfordshire	98
Kingston upon Thames	35
East Sussex	110
Somerset	112
West Berkshire	37
Wiltshire	215
North Somerset	51
Solihull	46
Shropshire	63
North Yorkshire	106
Isles of Scilly	19
Warwickshire	119
East Riding of Yorkshire	80
Northamptonshire	164
Bath and North East Somerset	37
Essex	314
Leicestershire	349
Poole	34
Worcestershire	130
Sutton	46
South Gloucestershire	61
Wokingham	37
Rutland	8
York	42
Buckinghamshire	124
Hampshire	295
Hertfordshire	265
West Sussex	163
Total	83,636

New Deal (Heywood and Middleton)

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many clients have joined the New Deal Voluntary Option since its launch *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the constituency of Heywood and Middleton. [100295]

Ms Jowell: From the launch of the New Deal in January 1998 to the end of September 1999, 22,400 young people nationally, and 11 young people in Heywood and Middleton constituency, had left the Gateway to start the Voluntary Sector option.

Early Year Services

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the inspection system for early years services. [99096]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* On 2 December, the Care Standards Bill was introduced into another place. Part V of the Bill makes provision for the reform of the regulation of early years services. In particular, it enables the regulation of child care and early years education in England to be brought together under a distinct and new Early Years Directorate in Ofsted.

Part V also makes other important changes to the regulation of child care. For example, it provides for new and uniform national standards for child care. It introduces, for the first time, checks on people working with children aged 8 and over. It will also ensure that overnight care is properly regulated.

These measures will ensure greater consistency in child care provision. They will result in safer environments of a higher quality for children and less bureaucracy for providers. Parents will have access to more information and so make better informed choices. And they will have greater peace of mind knowing that unsuitable people are prevented from caring for their children.

LEA Administration Costs

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much was spent, in cash terms, by local education authorities in England on administration within their education budgets in the most recent year for which information is available. [100928]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table gives information by each local education authority in England for the financial year 1997–98 on central administration expenditure within the local education authorities education budgets.

Expenditure on administration by LEAs in England for financial year 1997–98

LEA number	*LEA name*	*Total net expenditure (£000)*
201	London, City of	640
202	Camden	6,108
203	Greenwich	8,318
204	Hackney	8,037
205	Hammersmith and Fulham	3,631
206	Islington	5,222
207	Kensington and Chelsea	2,409
208	Lambeth	768
209	Lewisham	5,355
210	Southwark	6,505
211	Tower Hamlets	8,867
212	Wandsworth	3,823
213	Westminster, City of	5,143
301	Barking and Dagenham	3,782
302	Barnet	4,021
303	Bexley	4,780
304	Brent	2,883
305	Bromley	4,638
306	Croydon	3,604
307	Ealing	6,576
308	Enfield	6,959
309	Haringey	3,431
310	Harrow	3,444
311	Havering	2,623
312	Hillingdon	3,878
313	Hounslow	3,902
314	Kingston upon Thames	1,887
315	Merton	3,745
316	Newham	4,267
317	Redbridge	2,566
318	Richmond upon Thames	2,302
319	Sutton	3,825
320	Waltham Forest	7,579
330	Birmingham	13,139
331	Coventry	2,518
332	Dudley	3,070
333	Sandwell	4,199
334	Solihull	2,960
335	Walsall	2,258
336	Wolverhampton	3,464
340	Knowsley	3,518
341	Liverpool	8,431
342	St. Helens	2,519
343	Sefton	3,611
344	Wirral	5,324
350	Bolton	3,284
351	Bury	2,173
352	Manchester	7,160
353	Oldham	2,343
354	Rochdale	3,124
355	Salford	6,808
356	Stockport	3,434
357	Tameside	2,935
358	Trafford	1,906
359	Wigan	4,094
370	Barnsley	2,555
371	Doncaster	3,477
372	Rotherham	3,626
373	Sheffield	6,408
380	Bradford	6,516
381	Calderdale	2,882
382	Kirklees	6,401
383	Leeds	9,419
384	Wakefield	4,961
390	Gateshead	4,343
391	Newcastle upon Tyne	5,210
392	North Tyneside	1,217
393	South Tyneside	3,208
394	Sunderland	2,218
420	Isles of Scilly	48
800	Bath and North East Somerset	2,685
801	Bristol, City of	7,427
802	North Somerset	3,502
803	South Gloucestershire	5,222
805	Hartlepool	1,899
806	Middlesborough	2,890
807	Redcar and Cleveland	1,907
808	Stockton on Tees	2,562
810	Kingston upon Hull, City of	3,464
811	East Riding of Yorkshire	4,057
812	North East Lincolnshire	2,573
813	North Lincolnshire	5,227
815	North Yorkshire	6,894
816	York, City of	1,359
820	Bedfordshire	4,738
821	Luton	2,436
825	Buckinghamshire	10,175
826	Milton Keynes	5,128
830	Derbyshire	4,688
831	Derby City	2,428
835	Dorset	3,066
836	Poole	1,736
837	Bournemouth	2,252
840	Durham	7,556
841	Darlington	1,656
845	East Sussex	7,767
846	Brighton and Hove	4,044
850	Hampshire	13,474
851	Portsmouth	1,952
852	Southampton	1,058
855	Leicestershire	7,991
856	Leicester City	16,577
857	Rutland	374
860	Staffordshire	2,243
861	Stoke on Trent	3,484
865	Wiltshire	5,915
866	Swindon	1,485
903	Berkshire	8,404
905	Cambridgeshire	8,392
906	Cheshire	8,888
908	Cornwall	4,839
909	Cumbria	3,581
911	Devon	9,049
915	Essex	5,872
916	Gloucestershire	6,431
918	Hereford and Worcester	4,791
919	Hertfordshire	11,744
921	Isle of Wight	3,233
922	Kent	27,805
923	Lancashire	19,887
925	Lincolnshire	7,965

Expenditure on administration by LEAs in England for financial year 1997–98

LEA number	*LEA name*	*Total net expenditure (£000)*
926	Norfolk	5,349
928	Northamptonshire	5,848
929	Northumberland	4,918
930	Nottinghamshire	16,335
931	Oxfordshire	8,468
932	Shropshire	3,549
933	Somerset	6,492
935	Suffolk	5,309
936	Surrey	11,662
937	Warwickshire	6,914
938	West Sussex	8,767
Total		678,572

Labour and Social Affairs Council

Mr. Jim Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the Labour and Social Affairs Council held in Brussels on 29 November; and if he will make a statement. [100994]

Ms Jowell: I represented the UK at this meeting of the Council.

The Council approved the draft Joint Employment Report for 1999, the latest draft Employment Guidelines for 2000 and the latest draft of the Council Recommendation on the implementation of member states' employment policies. These elements were also agreed by the Joint ECOFIN/Social Affairs Council, held on the same day, at which the Secretary of State and I represented the UK. They will now be submitted to the Helsinki European Council on 10–11 December for agreement.

The Council reached political agreement on the Council Decision establishing the Employment Committee.

A Resolution on the employment and social aspects of the Information Society was adopted by the Council. This calls on member states to maximise the job potential of the Information Society through measures related to: learning and research; the world of work and public services.

In the absence of consensus on the provisions for employees involvement in the proposed European Company, Presidency efforts to find a compromise solution will continue in December.

The UK confirmed that it could only accept Article 63(4) as a legal base for extending Regulation 1408/71 (Co-ordination of Social Security Systems to Third Country Nationals). Some other member states supported Articles 42 and 308. The issue will be taken forward under the Portuguese Presidency.

Most member states called for varying degrees of extension of Regulation 1408/71 to cover Third Country Nationals and non-active persons. The UK argued in favour of simplifying the Regulation first and then extending it later as a separate exercise. Discussions will continue under the Portuguese Presidency.

The Council adopted Conclusions on a concerted strategy for modernising and improving social protection and agreed to the establishment of a Group of High Level Officials to exchange information and best practice and to write reports for the Council.

The Council noted a Presidency progress report on the Proposal for a Directive on Physical Agents (Vibration).

The Commissioner presented a package of measures to prohibit discrimination under the new powers of the Amsterdam Treaty (Article 13). There will be a discussion of the package in the appropriate working group in December in order to prepare the work of the Portuguese Presidency.

Employment Pact

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if section II 4 of the Resolution of the European Council on the European Employment Pact permits positive discrimination. [101099]

Ms Jowell: Section II 4 of the Resolution of the Employment Council does not permit positive discrimination and, in any case, has no legal effect.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the implementation of subsidiarity within the Employment Pact, with reference to individual projects planned. [101098]

Ms Jowell: The European Employment Pact is consistent with the principles of subsidiarity. The Pact is an amalgam of three non-binding processes, the existing Luxembourg employment process and the Cardiff economic reform process, and a third, new element, the macro-economic dialogue, termed the 'Cologne process'. There are no new individual projects planned.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his policy regarding the Macro-economic Dialogue, indicated in section 12 of the Resolution of the European Council on the European Employment Pact; and what discussions he has held on the dialogue. [101111]

Ms Jowell: The macro-economic dialogue referred to in section III of the Resolution of the European Council on the European Employment Pact takes place biannually among social partners and fiscal and employment policy makers at EU level. There are two elements, a technical working party which had their first meeting on 29 October 1999 and a political level ministerial meeting which took place for the first time on 8 November 1999. These meetings provided an opportunity for an initial exchange of views.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the Jumbo Council meeting referred to in the report to the Cologne Council on the European Employment Pact. [101113]

Ms Jowell: The Jumbo Council is the meeting of the Finance and Economic Policy Council and the Employment and Social Affairs Council. It meets every six months during each Presidency.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the measures for closer co-operation between EU states within the framework of the European Employment Pact; what new priorities are under discussion; and if he will make a statement on progress made under the Pact. [101110]

Ms Jowell: The European Employment Pact agreed at the Cologne European Council on 3–4 June 1999 brought together three processes. Two of these were the existing Luxembourg employment process and the Cardiff economic reform process. The third, new, element was the macro-economic dialogue, termed the 'Cologne process'. The Pact gives fresh impetus, through the macro-economic dialogue, to the promotion of long term, sustainable job creation in a climate of stability and steady growth.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many jobs his Department estimates have been created as a consequence of decisions taken through the Employment Pact. [101112]

Ms Jowell: The European Employment Pact gives fresh impetus to the existing Luxembourg employment process as well as introducing a macro-economic dialogue process which helps create a climate of stability and steady growth. The UK National Action Plan, produced as part of the Luxembourg process sets out policy initiatives for a medium term strategy to maximise job creation.

Teachers

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* maths and *(b)* science trainee teachers have been placed in the employment-based route to teaching schemes in each of the three terms of the 1998–99 school year; and what was the average cost per place in each of those terms. [100908]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* In the school year 1998–99, the number of training plans approved for the Graduate and Registered Teacher Programmes from people who had secured a placement to teach mathematics or science was as follows:

Term	*Mathematics*	*Science*
Autumn 1998	15	9
Spring 1999	9	11
Summer 1999	8	11

The average termly training grant for maths and science programmes approved during 1998–99 was:

Term	*Cost (£)*
Autumn 1998	1,075.41
Spring 1999	1,051.75
Summer 1999	1,206.53

Middle Schools

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the future of middle, deemed secondary, schools. [101177]

Ms Estelle Morris: Systems of organisation involving middle deemed secondary schools are traditional in some local education authority areas. We recognise that a variety of patterns of organisation are possible, and we support those that are in the best interests of education in the area. Any proposals to change the age range of a school by a full year or more will need to go through the formal statutory proposal process. If there are any objections, the proposals will be decided by a local school organisation committee or, if the committee cannot agree, by an independent adjudicator.

Unauthorised Absence

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average level of unauthorised absence *(a)* in schools in local education authorities with three-tier school systems and *(b)* nationally. [101176]

Ms Estelle Morris: Promoting regular school attendance is a key component in the Government's strategy to raise educational standards. Our recently published strategy document "Tackling Truancy Together" sets out our proposals to reduce days lost to education as a result of truancy. A copy has been placed in the Library.

In 1998–99, 0.6 per cent. of half days were missed as a result of unauthorised absence in maintained primary and secondary schools in those local education authorities in England which operated a three-tier system. This compares with an overall national figure of 0.7 per cent. of half days missed.

Head Teachers (Early Retirement)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many headteachers are eligible to apply to be considered for early retirement under his proposals; and how many retirement packages can be provided from within the funding allocated for the scheme; [101395]

(2) who will determine whether headteachers applying for the Government's early retirement package meet his Department's criteria of not being able to carry forward the major changes envisaged in improving education; and how applicants will be judged against the criteria. [101393]

Ms Estelle Morris: £10 million of Standards Fund money has been made available for 2000–01 to support the early retirement of headteachers. A limit of £50,000 has been placed on the support available in any individual case. This will allow for at least 200 retirements to be supported by the scheme. Local Education Authority employers will determine which of their headteachers appear to meet the scheme's criteria and prioritise those for whom they are applying for support. This Department and OFSTED will consider the evidence provided by LEAs in support of each application and announce during January which applications have been approved.

Teachers' Pay

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the planned expenditure on performance-related pay for teachers over the next two years, broken down by category of expenditure, including *(a)* training, *(b)* cost of external assessors and advisers and *(c)* pay awards for teachers passing through the threshold. [101397]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government have set aside up to £1 billion over the next two years to fund Green Paper proposals, the vast majority of which is for pay. We have announced a Standards Fund grant of £20 million in 2000–01 for introductory training for performance management and provisionally a further £8 million in 2001–02. We are considering what further training and support might be provided centrally for schools. The costs associated with this training and the external assessors and advisers will be subject to the outcome of negotiations. The Government has proposed to the STRB that teachers should receive up to £2,000 for passing the threshold. There will be no quota on threshold successes and it is not possible therefore to give a total cost in advance; this will depend upon the number of teachers who pass the threshold.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many applications have been received in response to his Department's advertisement for external assessors to operate under the teachers' performance-related pay scheme. [101394]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have received over 3,000 expressions of interest from people wishing to be an external assessor under our proposed threshold arrangements for teachers.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when Hay/McBer will complete its work on the threshold criteria under the teachers' performance-related pay proposals; and when he will publish the criteria. [101391]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has commissioned Hay/McBer to undertake research into the characteristics of effective teaching. In relation to the threshold, they will identify models of good practice which the Department will take into consideration in finalising its proposals for the threshold standards. He intends to invite views on the draft threshold standards early next year.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

DVLA

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on the backlog of unopened post at the DVLA; and what operational problems exist at the DVLA; [99106]

(2) what the current waiting time is for driving licence applications; and if he will make a statement. [99105]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 22 November 1999]:* Approximately 80,000 items of mail are received at DVLA daily. For security and operational reasons, DVLA post is never opened until the point of processing and therefore there is currently a four to five day queue of unopened mail, which is about normal for the time of year. The level of work awaiting processing is carefully monitored each day.

On the driving licence side, which accounts for 20,000 to 30,000 applications per day, the DVLA undertakes to issue driving licences, including return to the applicant, within three weeks—15 working days—from the date of receipt at the Agency. This three-week standard has been met or bettered consistently throughout the year.

In cases where a driver declares a medical condition—amounting to some 1,100 applications a day—because of the increased complexities the service standard is five weeks for a car licence and seven weeks for a bus or lorry licence. Some current cases in these categories are taking longer. Action is being taken to bring this service up to standard and the position is steadily improving.

There are no exceptional operational difficulties at the Agency. Over the pas 18 months, major changes to both driver and vehicle computer systems have been successfully introduced.

Ruddy Duck

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the direct cost is to his Department of each ruddy duck shot this season as part of the Central Science Laboratory's culling programme. [99592]

Mr. Mullin: The cost of the control trial is approximately £800,000 over four financial years. The aims of the control trail are to test the feasibility of eradicating the UK's population of ruddy duck within ten years, determining the financial cost of such a programme and indicating the number of birds needed to be culled each year to achieve this.

Additionally, the control trial aims to identify the factors which will impact on any national programme, such as whether compulsory access to land would be necessary, the distribution and numbers of ducks at various sites, methods of control dependent upon differing habitats and the number of visits needed to individual sites. Due to the many varied aspects and requirements of this control trial, a cost of controlling each individual duck was not requested from the contractors.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many ruddy duck have been shot by the Central Science Laboratory this season. [99598]

Mr. Mullin: The control trial is being undertaken in three areas of the country: Western Midlands, Anglesey where the control is all year round, and Fife, where the control is post-season only. The control trial does not focus on the numbers of birds culled, it looks at the wider picture of how the control is progressing given the various conditions, such as habitat, numbers of birds at each site, migratory movements, access to land, and number of site visits. However, between March and end of September 1999, with control only taking place in two of the regions,

over 12 per cent. of the total national ruddy duck population was culled. At the conclusion of the first year, the contractors will produce a detailed report one aspect of which will be the number of birds culled.

River Thames

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions who has responsibility for search and rescue on the River Thames in the event of an emergency. [99624]

Mr. Hill: Her Majesty's Coastguard is responsible for the initiation and co-ordination of civil maritime search and rescue within the United Kingdom search and rescue region. That region includes all tidal waters within UK territorial limits, and so includes the tidal River Thames.

Within that, responsibility for search and rescue on the Thames is undertaken by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), the Port of London Authority (PLA) and the Metropolitan Police; under detailed Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) between them, MCA retains overall responsibility and also handles incidents in the Thames estuary upstream to Canvey Island as part of its coastal operation. Under the MoU between MCA and the PLA, the PLA co-ordinates search and rescue incidents on the rest of tidal Thames, west of Canvey Island to Teddington Lock. PLA in turn have an MoU with the Metropolitan Police, covering the Thames between Crayfordness and Teddington, under which the Police assume responsibility for handling major incident in that area.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the division of responsibilities between the Marine Coastguard Agency, the River Police (Thames Division), the Fire Brigade and the Port of London Authority for safety on the River Thames. [99622]

Mr. Hill: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) is responsible for developing, promoting and enforcing high standards of marine safety; for minimising loss of life among seafarers and coastal users; and for responding to maritime emergencies 24 hours a day. This responsibility applies to the River Thames where MCA is responsible for the initiation and co-ordination of search and rescue.

The Port of London Authority (PLA) is responsible for the maintenance of the safety of navigation and for the conservancy of the tidal Thames. Under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the MCA, the PLA also co-ordinates search and rescue incidents west of Canvey Island to Teddington Lock. The PLA in turn has an MoU with the Metropolitan Police covering the Thames between Crayfordness and Teddington, under which the Police assume responsibility for any major incident in that area.

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) Thames Division is responsible for the prevention of crime and disorder, high visibility patrolling and emergency policing response, which includes saving or preserving life when called upon to do so. It has general responsibility for the co-ordination of the response to civil emergencies. Accordingly, the MPS assumes responsibility for any major incident between Crayfordness and Teddington. But it does not provide a dedicated search and rescue facility.

The London Fire Brigade (LFB) has designated responsibility for fire fighting and the provision of fire prevention information and advice. It has no designated responsibility for river rescue. With a view to increasing flexibility of river borne operations, it recently took delivery of two new fast response craft. While the primary purpose of these craft is for firefighting, they can be used to assist rescue operations and are equipped to do so. In the event of a serious incident on the Thames, the LFB would place their vessels and themselves at the disposal of the other relevant authorities to help rescue casualties.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions the Regional Marine Safety Committee has met; who are the members; what recommendations it has made on safety on the Thames; and how many recommendations have not been acted on. [99620]

Mr. Hill: The London District Marine Safety Committee covers safety on the Thames. It is chaired by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and has met on 11 occasions. Its members are representatives of HM Coastguard; Norfolk County Council; London Fire and Civil Defence Authority; Environment Agency; Port of London Authority; Health and Safety Executive; Trinity House; the Metropolitan Police; P&O European Ferries; Stena Line; F T Everard and Sons; National Federation of Fisherman's Organisations; Royal Yachting Association and Upper Thames Passenger Boat Association.

The main purpose of District Marine Safety Committees is to keep under review the distribution of responsibilities for safety, rescue and control of pollution on inland and coastal waters. They facilitate communication between interested parties and resolve local issues quickly. In fulfilling this role the London District Safety Committee, its sub-committees and working groups have considered a wide range of issues, many relevant to safety on the Thames. Achievements include development of model guidelines for Port Emergency Plans; assisting in the development of two Codes of Practice, one for local authorities and one for users, on Personal Watercraft; providing guidance on manning scales for small passenger boats; development of an inland waterway boat activity matrix as a basis for risk assessment and development of emergency plans for stretches of water with significant usage.

The London District Marine Safety Committee has made recommendations of more general interest to the annual National Marine Safety Steering Group Committee and its successor, the Marine Safety Co-ordinating Committee. Of particular relevance was a recommendation on the need to introduce more specific regulation to control alcohol abuse; a public consultation document was issued on 2 December 1999.

Child Passengers (Risks)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the risk involved in children *(a)* travelling as car passengers and *(b)* travelling as motorcycle pillion passengers; and if he will make a statement. [100011]

Mr. Hill: There were 85 child car passenger casualties per 100 million km travelled between 1996 and 1998 in Great Britain. Of these, seven per 100 million km were fatal or serious.

The number of children identified in the National Travel Survey making journeys as motorcycle pillion passengers over the last five years has been too small to provide a reliable estimate for the population as a whole.

The absolute numbers of child passenger casualties in the past three years are as shown in the table.

Child passenger casualties (aged 0–15) in Great Britain: 1996–98

	1996	*1997*	*1998*	*1996–98*
Two-wheel motor vehicle passengers				
Fatal	1	3	0	4
Serious	51	48	34	133
Slight	130	137	141	408
Total	182	188	175	545
Car passengers				
Fatal	75	72	63	210
Serious	1,218	1,171	1,133	3,522
Slight	14,036	14,598	14,546	43,180
Total	15,329	15,841	15,742	46,912

Croydon Tramlink

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when Croydon Tramlink will be fully operational and open to the public. [100437]

Mr. Hill: This is a matter for Tramtrack Croydon Ltd. (TCL), the private sector consortium which holds the concession to build, operate and maintain the tram system. I understand that TCL's latest programme has an opening date for the full system in February 2000.

Scooters

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in enabling scooters to be conveyed on trains since February 1997. [100727]

Mr. Hill: The position is little changed. The majority of train operating companies and, indeed, other transport operators, will not carry scooters. The difficulty is that many are physically too big to be accommodated, or they are not sufficiently stable to travel safely.

We are continuing to work with the wheelchair manufacturing industry to develop a system of labelling mobility equipment which is transportable. This will help disabled people to choose a scooter or wheelchair to suit their particular lifestyle.

Auxiliary Coastguards

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in how many coastguard stations in the UK auxiliary coastguards have operated digital selective calling in the last 12 months; for what period the emergency has lasted; how many auxiliary coastguards have been trained in the last year; and where they are located. [100665]

Mr. Hill: There have been no occasions on which Auxiliary Coastguards have operated digital selective calling in emergency situations in the last 12 months. 73 Auxiliary Coastguards have been trained in the last year and details of where they are located is summarised in the following table:

Coastguard Region	*Auxiliary Coastguards having received familiarisation*	*Location*
West of Scotland and Northern Ireland Region	59 in total	Greenock, Ardossan, Campbeltown, Tarbert and Islay
North East Scotland	2 in total	Kirkwall and Wick
Eastern	0	—
West	0	—
South-East	0	—
South-West	12 in total	St. Marys, Isles of Scilly, Lizard, Lands End, Trevose Head

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many training courses have been given to auxiliary coastguards in the operation of digital selective calling. [100664]

Mr. Hill: The training of Auxiliary Coastguards to operate Digital Selective Calling is undertaken on the job as part of their annual training programme, therefore specific training courses are not necessary.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funding has been made available to the Marine and Coastguard Agency for training auxiliary coastguards to operate digital selective calling in case of an emergency involving the failure of radio equipment. [100663]

Mr. Hill: Training of Auxiliary Coastguards who may be required to operate digital selective calling, eg in the case of an emergency involving the failure of radio equipment, is provided on the job. Funding for this would be met from the overall Auxiliary Coastguard budget which was increased by 6.5 per cent. for the financial year 1999–2000.

Rent

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to monitor the performance of the Greater Manchester Rent Officer Service in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [100769]

Mr. Mullin: Rent Officers are independent statutory officers, and my Department does not intervene in their decisions. Until recently, the conduct and performance of rent officers in Greater Manchester were the responsibility of the Chief Rent Officer for the Greater Manchester Rent Registration Area, under the supervision of a Proper Officer appointed by Manchester City Council. However, on 1 October the Rent Service was established as an Executive Agency of my Department. The Agency is committed to ensuring consistency and raising standards throughout the Rent Service.

Road Noise

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish

the list of the responses he has received to the Government's announcement of new measures to help alleviate noise on motorways and trunk roads. [100177]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* The Government's announcement of the budget and the criteria on 22 March this year to deal with some of the most serious and pressing cases of traffic noise on existing trunk roads did not invite responses. However, as a result of the announcement a further 43 sites have been brought to our attention, of which 23 have been taken forward for further study.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had recently with *(a)* the European Commission and *(b)* other EU ministers with regard to a common system of road noise measurement, and methods of alleviating road noise. [100172]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* Although there have not been recent Ministerial discussions on these issues, my Department is co-operating in a number of EU initiatives on noise, including work to finalise a Directive which, for the first time, would specify standards and limits for the noise generated by tyres.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on levels of noise nuisance to nearby residents which are caused by noise emanating from nearby motorways and trunk roads. [100216]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* The Highways Agency is currently undertaking detailed studies at a considerable number of locations with a view to identifying appropriate measures to reduce excessive levels of noise at nearby properties. The results of these studies are not yet available.

Untaxed Cars

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions with which agency the responsibility to pursue the owners of untaxed cars lies; and if he will make a statement. [100790]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* The responsibility for pursuing the keepers of unlicensed vehicles rests with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). The Agency works closely with the police and traffic wardens to detect unlicensed vehicles on the public road. Where an offence has been confirmed, action is taken through out of court settlement or, in the more serious cases, by prosecution.

Last year successful action was taken against 475,000 tax dodgers with some £57.9 million recovered in fines and penalties. In addition, 125,000 evaders or potential evaders relicensed their vehicles as a direct result of enforcement action bringing in a further £15 million.

Road Diggings

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy on the use of permanent reinstatement materials by utility companies when they dig up paved roads and footways. [101135]

Mr. Hill: Utilities carrying out street works are required to reinstate the street in accordance with the Specification for the Reinstatement of Openings in Highways, which is a statutory code of practice published under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991. The specification requires the permanent reinstatement to match the original surface materials as closely as possible.

Public Transport (Women)

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the initiatives taken since May 1997 on women and public transport usage, indicating in each case the *(a)* date of the initiative, *(b)* budget and *(c)* impact assessment carried out; and if he will make a statement. [100886]

Mr. Hill: As women are the main users of public transport, our "New Deal for Transport" is of particular importance to them. It has put a greater emphasis on providing better quality transport services; on providing safer public transport; on improving the quality of the pedestrian environment; and on promoting land-use policies which encourage local services. The Commission for Integrated Transport will also take full account of women's transport needs.

A number of initiatives have been—and will be—undertaken to improve the general availability and accessibility of public transport; for example, through Local Transport Plans, Bus Quality Partnerships and the national public transport information system. More specifically, we are finalising the production of a gender audit to assist transport planners and operators to develop and implement public transport systems that meet women's transport requirements and encourage sustainable development. The audit will be available in the new year.

We are also continuing to make use of consultations, research projects and disaggregated statistics to identify the impact of policy on women. We also require the inclusion of policy appraisal statements in each Ministerial policy submission.

A380 Kingskerswell Bypass

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will include the A380 Kingsherswell bypass in his review of future road building. [101049]

Mr. Hill: The A380 Kingskerswell bypass was withdrawn from the trunk road programme in 1996 and, indeed, the A380 no longer forms part of the Trunk Road Network. Responsibility for the promotion of any such scheme lies with Torbay Council and Devon County Council which would have to consider it within the context of their respective Local Transport Plans. The Authorities are currently undertaking a joint study along the A380 corridor, which is to be developed for inclusion within their final Local Transport Plans, due for submission in July 2000.

Countryside (Public Access)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what

plans he has to increase public access to woodlands and river banks; and if he will make a statement. [101215]

Mr. Mullin: The Government's plans, announced in March this year, to introduce a new statutory right of access on foot to specified categories of open countryside—mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common land—will be included in the countryside Bill which was announced in the Queen's Speech. At the Government's request, the Countryside Agency, the Countryside Council for Wales and the Forestry Commission have recently reported on the case for extending public access to other types of open countryside, such as coast, woodland and riverside. We are considering their views carefully before deciding how best to proceed.

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what amount has been spent since 20 March 1998 on *(a)* legal, *(b)* financial and *(c)* other consultancy costs for the public private partnership for London Underground; and (i) what were the initial budgets and (ii) what are the future estimates for future consultancy work. [101082]

Mr. Hill: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given on 12 May 1999, *Official Report,* columns 154–55W. I shall shortly be reporting London Transport's expenditure on external consultants up to the end of the first half of the current financial year. London Transport will not know the overall requirements or costs for external advice until the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) transaction has been completed, but the Government are working with LT to ensure that we receive the best advice while minimising the overall costs of implementing the PPP.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list research published by the London Underground task force; and if he will make a statement on its future work programme. [101080]

Mr. Hill: The Task Force for London Transport has published no research. Its role is to ensure that the extra resources London Transport were given in July, translate into real improvements for passengers.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the findings of the task force set up to monitor improvements to London Underground indicating how often the task force has met and when. [100952]

Mr. Hill: The Task Force monitors investment in the London Underground to ensure the delivery of improvements to passengers; this work is on-going. The task force meets every month.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the number of delays to passenger services of 15 minutes or more for each line of the London Underground for 1998 and 1999. [100946]

Mr. Hill: London Underground Limited (LUL) are responsible for delays for the day-to-day running of their Underground network, including any delays to services. LUL have provided the information set out in the table.

London Underground delays of 15 minutes and over period 1 January 1998 to date (November 1999)Count of incident rate

Symptom	*Bakerloo Line*	*Central Line*	*District Line*	*Jubilee and East London Lines*	*Metropolitan and Circle Lines (C and H)*	*Metropolitan and Circle Lines (Main)*	*Northern Line*	*Piccadilly Line*	*Victoria Line*	*Total*
Altercation/assault	22	42	26	8	5	16	28	21	2	170
Animal incident	1	1	2	—	1	2	2	1	—	10
Antisocial behaviour	7	15	13	15	8	9	15	12	3	97
Asset damaged/unfit to use	17	9	5	2	1	3	6	4	—	47
Audible warning on train	—	3	—	8	1	15	3	—	—	30
Awaiting connection	—	1	—	11	—	2	1	—	—	15
Bomb alert—nothing found	—	1	2	1	2	—	1	3	1	11
Booking office closed	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	2
Chemical release	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	—	2
Computer system failure	4	2	2	48	3	4	2	12	—	77
Congestion	2	7	4	1	—	3	7	3	1	28
Contact between person and train	—	2	1	—	—	3	1	1	—	8
Current charges late	—	—	—	1	—	1	2	4	—	8
Current discharged	9	3	4	1	—	—	3	4	1	25
Damage to personal property	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Doors obstructed/held open	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	13
Drunk	1	3	4	5	2	5	4	11	—	35
Dual aspect on signal	—	—	—	6	—	1	1	—	—	8
Earth recorded	—	—	2	2	1	—	2	—	—	7
Emergency brakes applied on train	—	101	—	—	1	1	—	2	3	108
Erratic acceleration of train	—	—	—	—	1	1	—	—	—	2

London Underground delays of 15 minutes and over period 1 January 1998 to date (November 1999)Count of incident rate

Symptom	Bakerloo Line	Central Line	District Line	Jubilee and East London Lines	Metropolitan and Circle Lines (C and H)	Metropolitan and Circle Lines (Main)	Northern Line	Piccadilly Line	Victoria Line	Total
Error miscellaneous	22	36	14	15	14	24	25	19	3	172
Escalator incident	10	6	—	3	—	1	1	1	3	25
Fall between train and platform	3	6	4	—	—	—	—	1	—	14
Fire/smoke alert	73	66	37	20	22	15	59	29	20	341
Flooding	2	4	4	4	1	5	4	2	—	26
Gas leak	—	—	1	3	—	1	1	1	—	7
High wind	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Infrastructure damage/unfit to use	1	4	2	8	4	5	4	3	—	31
Leaves on track	—	—	—	—	—	3	—	—	—	3
Lift incident	—	1	—	—	—	—	2	14	—	17
Miscellaneous/no details	1	2	17	2	2	3	3	5	2	37
Missile	—	8	3	2	—	—	—	1	—	14
No aspect on signal	1	2	—	1	—	2	—	—	—	6
No forward movement of train	42	124	18	35	20	32	63	13	12	359
No stock	—	50	—	1	3	1	3	2	—	60
Object on train	7	10	6	8	4	11	10	9	—	65
Passenger alarm operated	—	16	2	3	—	1	4	2	4	32
Person action miscellaneous	5	1	6	5	3	5	1	3	3	32
Person caught/struck by doors	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
Person ill	8	38	24	5	15	14	30	21	3	158
Person on track	14	15	10	6	8	9	13	8	10	93
Person overcarried to depot/siding	2	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	3
Person train safety (other)	—	1	1	—	—	—	1	1	—	5
Person under train	8	11	7	1	4	2	13	13	6	65
Person(s) injured	1	2	—	1	1	1	4	1	—	11
Platform edge door incident	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	2
Platform overrun	—	4	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	5
Points failure	41	54	61	21	21	48	35	24	1	305
Police request	5	12	5	7	2	9	5	7	2	54
Possession overrun	16	12	46	10	14	7	26	20	10	161
Power failure	12	11	7	10	4	9	6	6	—	65
Rail broken or displaced	10	9	9	3	3	3	1	4	23	65
Signal overrun	13	11	9	15	8	11	22	13	—	102
Signal remaining at danger	75	16	56	82	16	32	32	30	11	350
Smell on train	1	—	—	2	—	1	1	—	—	5
Snow/ice	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2
Staff absent/not in position	10	54	24	237	22	33	55	55	29	519
Stopped at closed station	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Surfer	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
TEP/TMS flashing or dead	—	—	1	11		—	—	—	—	12
Theft	2	5	3	3	1	6	4	2	1	27
Track circuit failure	82	148	75	27	61	67	39	30	21	550
Track miscellaneous	10	3	8	16	6	7	12	6	18	86
Track safety compromised	1	2	—	—	—	1	1	—	—	5
Train brakes weak	1	—	1	1	—	—	—	1	—	4
Train braking too hard	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
Train collision	1	—	—	—	—	3	—	—	—	4
Train defect miscellaneous	26	66	42	87	22	75	67	66	30	481
Train derailment	1	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	3
Train door safety system failure	—	2	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	4
Train door opened incorrectly	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	—	2

London Underground delays of 15 minutes and over period 1 January 1998 to date (November 1999)Count of incident rate

Symptom	Bakerloo Line	Central Line	District Line	Jubilee and East London Lines	Metropolitan and Circle Lines (C and H)	Metropolitan and Circle Lines (Main)	Northern Line	Piccadilly Line	Victoria Line	Total
Train failed brake test	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Train sluggish	—	15	—	7	2	3	2	1	1	31
Train uncoupled	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Tunnel telephone operated	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
Unattended/lost property	17	29	26	14	32	9	44	22	28	221
Unauthorised access	—	2	1	1	1	—	—	1	—	6
Unauthorised use of inter-car doors	—	2	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	4
Unexploded bomb	—	1	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	3
Unusual noise on train	—	2	—	—	—	2	1	—	—	5
Vandalism	5	34	21	8	2	15	9	4	4	102
Vomit	1	2	1	1	1	—	—	4	—	10
Wheels flatted	—	—	—	2	—	1	—	—	—	3
Wrong signal cleared	1	21	6	3	3	6	1	9	1	51
Wrong train description	—	—	3	—	2	1	—	—	—	6
Total	596	1,117	629	810	353	557	689	534	[illegible]	5,544

Westminster Underground Station

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Westminster Underground Station on the Jubilee Line will open. [101081]

Mr. Hill: London Transport aim to open the Jubilee Line station at Westminster shortly before Christmas. It is, however, a deep and complex station, being constructed on a constricted site. LT cannot therefore guarantee the opening date at present.

Essex County Council Press Officer

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the oral statement of the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes) of 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 731, on what evidence the Minister based her statement that an Essex County Council press officer contacted newspapers and other media outlets in Essex, indicating the media outlets contacted and the dates and means of contact. [100844]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The statement was based on information received from the County Council and the Programme Officer. The media outlets contacted were as follows:

Evening Gazette
Evening Echo
East Anglian Daily Times
Essex Courier
Epping Gazette
Herts and Essex Observer
Yellow Advertiser
BBC Essex
Essex FM
Anglia TV
BBC TV East
BBC Newsroom Southeast

All the above mentioned outlets were contacted on 3 November, by fax. Additionally, the *Essex Chronicle* was dealt with in the manner I alluded to in my oral statement.

Housing Stock

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he has in place to help local authorities in relation to large-scale voluntary transfer of housing stock. [101084]

Mr. Mullin: My Department has published comprehensive guidance on the stock transfer process, which is designed to assist local authorities who are transferring all or part of their housing stock to a Registered Social Landlord. Other measures in place include (a) the ability to use capital resources (i.e. provision for credit liabilities) rather than revenue to meet the cost of premium payments which arise when outstanding loans with the Public Works Loan Board are repaid early; (b) allowing authorities to capitalise for up to three years after transfer which additional rent allowance expenditure would otherwise fall on the general fund; (c) allowing authorities to value their stock using a discount rate of 7 per cent. rather than 8 per cent. as previously, thereby increasing the size of their capital receipt; and (d) guidance about warranties.

M6

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for widening the M6 motorway between Preston and Birmingham. [101348]

Mr. Hill: I have no plans to widen the M6 between Preston and Birmingham.

My noble Friend the Minister with responsibility for roads and road safety announced on 23 March the programme of multi-modal and roads-based studies proposed in the Roads Review. The West Midlands to North West Conurbation Study, including the M6 between

junctions 11 and 20, is in Tranche 1 of this programme. I have pleasure in announcing that this study has recently been awarded to consultants and will be completed by the summer of 2001.

The consultants will be asked to indicate a comprehensive range of strategies across all modes that could be used to tackle the traffic problems in the area, and encourage modal shift especially for freight.

As regards the M6 between junction 20 and the Scottish Border, the Highways Agency are seeking to develop a route management strategy study starting in the spring of 2000.

Transport Council

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what matters concerning air traffic control will be decided at the 9 to 10 December Transport Council. [101624]

Mr. Mullin: Although there will be an exchange of views on air traffic management at the Transport Council on 9 and 10 December, no decisions on any matters concerning air traffic control will be taken.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place a copy of the Commission Communication on air traffic delays which will be discussed at the Transport Council on 9 to 10 December in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [101610]

Mr. Mullin: A copy of the final version of the Commission's Communication on "the creation of a single European sky" will be placed in both Libraries of the House as soon as it is received.

Eurocontrol

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the final decision will be made on the EU membership of Eurocontrol; and if he will make a statement. [101623]

Mr. Mullin: Negotiations between Eurocontrol and the European Community on the terms and conditions for Community accession to Eurocontrol are still in progress. It is hoped to conclude them early next year.

Domestic Airline Routes

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the Government are doing to encourage competition in the main domestic airline routes in the United Kingdom. [101299]

Mr. Mullin: The Government believe that the interests of UK consumers are best served by ensuring that a framework exists within which airlines can compete freely to provide services. The UK strongly supported the creation of the European Single Aviation Market for scheduled, chartered and air cargo services, which came into force on 1 January 1993.

Within the Single Market, Community carriers may offer the services they wish and set fares according to their commercial judgment. It is therefore open for any Community air carrier to offer domestic air services on routes within the UK, if it considers that such services are commercially viable. It will often be the case however, in the UK as elsewhere, that demand on domestic air routes is insufficient to support competitive provision of services.

Housing Capital Resources

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to make an announcement about the distribution to local authorities of housing capital resources for 2000–01. [101644]

Mr. Raynsford: Details of housing capital allocations for local authorities for 2000–01 will be announced tomorrow. I am arranging for tables giving individual Housing Investment Programme allocations to be placed in the Library of the House. These tables will also show the performance band in which each authority has been placed.

HEALTH

Nurses National Register

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many registered nurses have been struck off the national register held by the UK Central Council for Nurses and Midwives and subsequently reinstated, and in what time period this reinstatement occurred, since the creation of the UK Central Council for Nurses and Midwives for *(a)* all disciplinary issues and *(b)* cases involving care of the elderly. [98469]

Mr. Denham: In the period since 1 July 1983, when the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting was first established, to 31 March 1999, 1,098 practitioners have been removed from, and 256 restored to the register. Further information on this and on cases involving care of the elderly is available from the UKCC.

Nursing Vacancies (West Surrey)

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurse vacancies exist in West Surrey Health Authority. [99911]

Mr. Denham: The number of nurse vacancies in West Surrey Health Authority area as at 31 March 1999 is given in the table.

	Total vacancies	*3 month vacancies*
Qualified nurses	310	260
Unqualified nurses	50	40

Notes:
Total vacancies are those posts trusts were actively trying to fill.
Hard to fill vacancies are those posts that were vacant for three months or more at 31 March 1999.
Figures are rounded to the nearest 10 as hard to fill
Source:
Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey March 1999

Tooth Whiteners

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received about the removal of tooth whiteners from sale following its change of status from a medical device to a cosmetic. [100661]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

I have received 51 representations on tooth whiteners, comprised of 32 letters from Parliamentary colleagues, seven Parliamentary questions and 12 letters from industry and the public following the confirmation from the Court of Appeal that these products are subject to the provisions of the Cosmetics Directive.

Avon Health Authority

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of Avon Health Authority's scheme to reduce out-patient waiting times by guaranteeing a number of out-patient appointments for each primary care group. [100641]

Mr. Denham: Avon Health Authority, working with local general practitioners and National Health Service trusts, is looking at ways of improving orthopaedic waiting times. As part of this work, the health authority is considering whether the successful pilot scheme, operated by North Bristol NHS Trust and North West Bristol Primary Care Group, which guarantees individual GP practices a specified number of out-patient appointments can be extended across the health authority area. No formal assessment of the North Bristol pilot scheme has been undertaken by the NHS Executive. We welcome local initiatives to reduce out-patient waiting times by involving PCGs.

Denplan

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS dentists have required their patients to take out insurance with Denplan in the most recent 12-month period for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [100625]

Mr. Hutton: Information is not available on the number of dentists who decide to de-register some or all of their National Health Service patients, and at the same time offer to provide future care and treatment under a private arrangement, which may include an insurance plan such as Denplan.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the work of the Multiple Sclerosis Society Young Carers Project. [100830]

Mr. Hutton: While the Department has made no specific assessment of this project, we are aware of the valuable work of the Multiple Sclerosis Society in this and other fields. The Department is however, working closely with local authorities, health authorities, the voluntary sector, and young people themselves to implement our commitment to young carers as outlined in the National Carers Strategy.

Anaesthetists

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations have been cancelled in the last 12 months at Bolton Royal Hospital due to unavailability of an anaesthetist. [100921]

Mr. Denham: Over the last twelve months, no operations were cancelled at the Royal Bolton Hospital due to the unavailability of an anaesthetist. All consultant anaesthetist posts at the hospital are currently filled and two additional consultants are expected to be appointed early next year.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations have been cancelled at *(a)* St. Bartholomew's Hospital, *(b)* the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel and *(c)* the Homerton Hospital in Hackney due to the lack of availability of an anaesthetist. [101409]

Mr. Denham: Since April 1999, St. Bartholomew's Hospital has cancelled an estimated three operations, the Royal London Hospital an estimated 14 operations and the Homerton Hospital no operations, due to illness or absence of anaesthetic staff, or because an anaesthetist was called away to deal with a clinical emergency. Currently, all consultant anaesthetist posts within the Homerton National Health Service Trust are filled.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to ensure the availability of anaesthetists, and to prevent operations being cancelled due to their absence. [101410]

Mr. Denham: At national level, numbers of higher specialist trainees in anaesthetics have been reviewed recently and we are satisfied there are sufficient to meet National Health Service demands for consultant anaesthetists over the next few years. Currently, there are enough higher specialist trainees in anaesthetics, for there to be around 1,280 extra qualifying for consultant posts by 2005. It will be for individual NHS trusts and health authorities who are accountable for the quality of the services they provide, to determine the number, grade and mix of staff they will require to deliver quality services in their location.

Health Expenditure (Leicestershire)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what capital projects have been approved in Leicestershire during *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99, *(d)* 1999–2000 and *(e)* 2000–01. [101056]

Mr. Denham: Figures are provided in the table. Capital schemes for 2000–01 are still awaiting approval.

Year	*NHS Trust*	*Capital project*	*Amount £ million*
1996–97	Leicester Royal Infirmary	Linear Accelerators	2.7
1997–98	—	—	—
1998–99	Leicestershire Mental Health Services[1]	Elderly Psychiatric Disorder/Elderly High Dependency Unit	9.2
1998–99	Leicestershire Mental Health Services[1]	Community Mental Health Teambase	1.1

Year	NHS Trust	Capital project	Amount £ million
1999–2000	Leicester General Hospital	Satellite Dialysis (Lincoln County Hospital site)	1.1
1999–2000	Leicestershire and Rutland Healthcare	Loughborough District General Hospital (Phase II)	9.4

[1] On 1 April 1999 Leicestershire Mental Health Services National Health Service Trust and Fosse Health NHS Trust merged to form Leicestershire and Rutland Healthcare NHS Trust.

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what has been the average level of increase in percentage terms for health authorities for 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000; and what has been the percentage increase for Leicestershire Health Authority; [101055]

(2) what level of funding would be received by Leicestershire Health Authority if it was funded at 100 per cent. of weighted capitation. [101054]

Mr. Denham: Leicestershire Health Authority's weighted capitation target for 1999–2000 is £530.78 million.

The table shows the average cash increase for health authorities for 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 and the cash increase for Leicestershire Health Authority.

Year	Average cash increase in percentage terms	Leicestershire Health Authority cash increase in percentage terms
1997–98	3.93	4.28
1998–99	4.70	5.19
1999–2000	6.60	7.15

Anti-bullying Policies

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list, by region, those NHS trusts which have implemented anti-bullying policies. [100937]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* Bullying of staff, in whatever form it may take, is unacceptable and should not be tolerated by any National Health Service employer. Information on local anti-bullying policies is not collected centrally, but may be obtained from individual National Health Service employers.

The National Health Service depends on the skill and dedication of its staff. Providing staff with a good, safe working environment free from discrimination and harassment is a key priority for local managers.

Radiation

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has undertaken on whether persorption and translocation expose certain subgroups of the population to increased radiation doses. [100861]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The Department has funded, and continues to fund, research into the phenomenon of persorption (absorption of particulate material through the gut wall). This research has demonstrated that particulate material can be persorped and translocated in some animal models under very specific biological conditions. However, further work is required to determine whether this would increase the dose to those tissues affected.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has undertaken into the risks associated with ingestion and inhalation of radioactive particles. [100854]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) has a comprehensive programme of research on the biokinetics and dosimetry of inhaled particles, including human studies of particle deposition and clearance and animal studies of particle dissolution in the lung. Complementary studies on ingested particles have also been undertaken. These studies have the aim of improving estimates of dose and risk by providing information for the development of biokinetic and dosimetric models. In recent years, many of these studies have been carried out with partial support from the European Commission in multi-partner projects involving institutions in several member states. The NRPB has recently participated in a review of risks from ingested and inhaled particles, and in the development of a database of experiments on radionuclide biokinetics, undertaken for the European Late Effects Programme funded by the European Commission. The Department has also funded studies on the behaviour and effects of inhaled and systemically administered radioactive particles.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has undertaken on methods for assessing the relative biological effectiveness of Auger-emitting radionuclides. [100858]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The National Radiation Protection Board has undertaken studies of the biokinetics, dosimetry and relative biological effectiveness (RBE) of the Auger-emitting nuclide, zinc-65. The method used to compare the RBE of zinc-65 and x-rays was to measure chromosome damage in cultured prostate cells either incubated with zinc-65 or exposed to x-rays. The NRPB has recently contributed to a review of data on Auger-emitting nuclides, undertaken for the European Late Effects Programme, funded by the European Commission. The Department is also currently funding research into the effects of Auger emitters which is not yet complete.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received about the risks from low doses and low dose rates of ionising radiation; and what research his Department is *(a)* undertaking and *(b)* has commissioned on this subject. [100841]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* Since 1986, the Department and its predecessor, the Department of Health and Social Security, has administered the Radiological Protection Research Programme. The objective of this programme is to identify the research which is needed to inform policy development in the area of low level radiation exposure (both ionising and non-ionising), its effects, and the need

to quantify the risk to public health and to implement appropriate preventative measures. The programme has funded many individual research projects designed to examine these aspects of radiation exposure. During that 14-year period, the Department has had a considerable number of representations on the effects of low level radiation exposure from both individuals and groups representing a large variety of environmental concerns.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department will commission research into the health effects of *(a)* ingested and *(b)* inhaled uranium as a result of exposure to ammunition containing depleted uranium. [100842]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has not commissioned any research into the effects of exposure to depleted uranium and has no plans to do so.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what epidemiological research his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned into the health effects of aqueous and atmospheric discharges of radioactive isotopes from licensed nuclear sites in England and Wales. [100843]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The Department is funding a project entitled "Geographical variations in childhood cancer incidence generally and in relation to nuclear installations." The contract is held by the Childhood Cancer Research Group in Oxford but is a multi-centre collaboration so that all cases of childhood cancer in Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) between 1969 and 1993 can be included in the study. The study will be looking at variations in incidence rate in relation to socio-demographic factors, clustering, population mixing, nuclear installations and parental preconceptual irradiation.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has undertaken on the relationship between the chemical form of specific radionuclides and their localisation in the body. [100860]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The Department has funded research into whether the chemical form (speciation) of particular radionuclides effects their uptake. Currently, the Department is funding a study of the gastro-intestinal uptake by critical populations of certain radionuclides found in the general environment, such as strontium. The results, when available, will be used to test the validity of uptake models.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the radiation dose from plutonium incorporated in tracheo-bronchial lymph nodes is determined. [100853]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* There are two methods that are currently in widespread use by the radiation protection profession around the world. Both were developed by the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP). The first is the ICRP 30 Lung Model, the second the ICRP Human Respiratory Tract Model for Radiological Protection (HRTM). The approaches in both are broadly similar to each other, but HRTM is based on more recent information and understanding. In particular, the parameters used in the HRTM to calculate the amounts of inhaled materials retained in the tracheobronchial lymph nodes (TBLN) were based on numerous measurements of radionuclides in lungs and TBLN from tissues taken at autopsies.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has undertaken to establish whether plutonium isotopes concentrate in human gonads. [100856]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The Department has funded research to establish whether plutonium concentrates in human gonads. The project, using extremely low levels of a very pure form of plutonium-237 in volunteers, demonstrated that plutonium does not concentrate in human testes.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has undertaken into whether radionuclides concentrate in human gonads. [100855]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The Department relies on advice on this matter from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB). As part of a programme of research on the biokinetics and dosimetry of radionuclides, NRPB have measured the retention of radionuclides in the testes of rodents and, in collaboration with the Paterson Institute for Cancer Research, studied mechanisms of uptake. Work has concentrated on the behaviour of naturally occurring and artificial alpha emitters and also Auger emitters, because of the importance of the relative position of the retained nuclide and target cells for these short range emissions. Most radionuclides do not concentrate selectively in the gonads. The NRPB's Assessment of Internal Doses to Subjects in the Health and Safety Executive Follow-up to Gardner Study involved calculating doses to testes from incorporated radionuclides for a group of Sellafield workers. As a part of this project, information relating to radionuclide retention in the testes was reviewed. Particular attention was paid to plutonium. From the data available, it was found that only between one thousandth and one ten thousandth part of the plutonium taken up by the body ended up in the testes.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has undertaken on the interaction between ionising radiation and other environmental agents. [100857]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has funded research in an attempt to examine the interaction between ionising radiation and other environmental agents, specifically the interaction between gamma rays and benzene. These experiments proved very difficult to perform in realistic biological systems and the results were inconclusive. Further information on the mechanisms of interaction between radiation and other environmental agents remains a priority for research.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has undertaken on methods for assessing the relative biological effectiveness of natural alpha-emitting radioisotopes. [100859]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The National Radiation Protection Board has undertaken experimental studies of the biokinetics and dosimetry of

naturally-occurring alpha-emitting radioisotopes of thorium, uranium and polonium, with the aim of improving estimates of dose and risk from exposure to these radionuclides. An NRPB study of the relative biological effectiveness (RBE) of in-utero exposure of mice to plutonium-239 alpha emissions, chromosome damage in bone marrow cells of offspring was compared in animals exposed to either plutonium-239 or x-rays. This methodology is applicable to naturally occurring alpha-emitting nuclides and avoids large-scale studies of tumour induction. The Department is also funding studies in animals on the effects of inhaled radon. These studies, concentrating on dose and dose rate effects in the induction of lung cancer, will provide information for the assessment of RBE.

Audiology Services

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made by the review into hearing aid and audiology services; and when he will receive the report of the review. [101142]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The National Health Service Executive established a working group to take a closer look at hearing aid services and the part they play in a modern NHS. Ways of developing hearing aid services are currently being considered.

Childline

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Childline; and if he will make a statement. [100945]

Mr. Hutton: The Department is committed to ensuring that voluntary organisations in receipt of section 64 funding gain maximum benefit from this financial support. The Department constantly keeps under review grants awarded, to check that the voluntary organisations such as Childline are performing effectively and the grants continue to take forward departmental policy priorities and objectives.

As part of this process, during the autumn of 1997, Childline had a routine but in depth inspection by the Department. The report was extremely positive, describing Childline as a significant national organisation. The monitoring, evaluation and review arrangements attached to grants received by voluntary organisations such as Childline, requires them to provide us with an annual report on the way the Department's funding has been used. The report gives a detailed account of what has been achieved during the preceding financial year.

Over its 10-year existence, Childline's achievements have been considerable. In particular, the agency has identified a previously largely unrecognised need; established a unique non-statutory service shaped from the start by children themselves in the way they used the service and the needs they expressed; built a good reputation becoming well respected and credible in the field; and maintained a very clear image to the public through the purity and consistency of its focus.

Cancer Treatment

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the *(a)* number of patients to be treated, *(b)* number of beds, *(c)* number of consultant surgeons and *(d)* revenue budget for the financial year 2000–01 for (i) the Royal Marsden Hospital in London and (ii) the Christie Hospital in Manchester. [101492]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not yet available. The National Health Service trusts responsible for the Royal Marsden and the Christie Hospitals are currently developing plans but are unable to give estimates due to the number of variable factors which will affect forecasts this far in advance.

Long-term Care

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish the Government's response to the report of the Royal Commission on long-term care. [101351]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to the House on 2 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 444–54.

Nurses

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS trusts have awarded the 12 per cent. pay rise to newly qualified nurses. [101355]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not centrally available.

All National Health Service bodies employing nurses on national contracts should have implemented the pay scales set out in Advance Letter (NM) 1/99 issued to the service on the 8 April 1999.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial incentives he has evaluated for E-grade nurses, ward sisters and charge nurses. [101356]

Mr. Denham: This year nurses got their biggest real terms pay rise for 10 years, and for the first time in five years the award is being paid in full without staging. Most E grade nurses, ward sisters and charge nurses received a 4.7 per cent. increase in basic pay.

Our proposals for modernising the National Health Service pay system were outlined in "Agenda for Change" published on 15 February 1999. Our aim is for a new pay system which properly rewards responsibility, competence and performance. For nurses these changes will mean a new career structure to replace the current clinical grades, which will provide better career progression and fairer rewards for developing new skills, taking on extended roles and team working. This is under active discussion with the trades unions.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he will take to stop experienced nurses from leaving the NHS. [101357]

Mr. Denham: The human resources framework "Working Together" sets out the Government's determination to improve the quality of working lives for all staff in the National Health Service and requires NHS employers to improve retention rates for all health professional staff. "Making A Difference" sets out a new

vision for the future of nursing in the new NHS to ensure that nurses are able to develop satisfying and rewarding careers, including the introduction of nurse consultant posts. Significant progress has already been made to improve pay, tackle racism and inequality and create safe and healthy work places.

In September this year, Ministers launched a £1 million campaign called "Improving Working Lives in the NHS" as part of our wider agenda on supporting the family. Each region has appointed a high profile champion to lead a multi disciplinary task force to introduce more flexible and family friendly policies in the NHS. The "Improving Working Lives Champion" for Chorley is Kath Holbourn, Director of Nursing, Leighton Hospital, Middlewich Road, Crewe and can be contacted on 01270 612 351.

Medicines

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he intends to take in order to stop the practice of making medicines available by postcode area. [101358]

Mr. Denham: We have said many times we recognise and will tackle unacceptable variations in access to care and treatment. That is why we have set up the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). NICE will reduce post-code variations by issuing authoritative national guidance based on evidence of the clinical and cost-effectiveness of treatments.

Primary Care

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he will issue guidelines setting out which services primary care trusts will manage; [101411]

(2) if it will be possible for new primary care trusts to provide *(a)* acute elders' services, *(b)* children's services, *(c)* maternity services and *(d)* services for those with learning difficulties. [101408]

Mr. Denham: Only Level 4 primary care trusts will be permitted to directly provide primary health care services. The range and nature of these services will be defined individually, by the outcome of local consultation. PCTs will not be able to provide acute services; however, a key part of their role will be to commission these services from a secondary care provider. As existing guidance ("Primary Care Trusts: Establishing Better Services") states, PCTs will adopt the commissioning role previously employed by Health Authorities.

Guidance on the establishment, preparatory period and functions of PCTs is currently being prepared and will be issued in late December. This will further outline the PCT role in commissioning and developing community health services.

Care Homes

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people were employed in England's care homes and day centres *(a)* in each of the past 20 years, *(b)* on 1 May 1997, *(c)* on 9 March 1998 and *(d)* on the most recent date for which figures are available. [101310]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available centrally. Information is available on people employed by local authority social services care homes and day centres. The table sets out the whole time equivalent for staff employed in England's care homes and day centres on 30 September of each year since 1979.

Local authority personal social services staff employed in day centres and residential care homes on 30 September, 1979 to 1998

England — *Whole time equivalents*

	Staff of day centres	*Staff of residential care homes*
1979	11,356	80,734
1980	12,103	82,516
1981	12,781	83,117
1982	13,522	83,611
1983	14,468	85,413
1984	15,035	85,058
1985	15,680	85,456
1986	16,383	86,694
1987	17,766	88,242
1988	18,440	88,496
1989	19,423	88,285
1990	19,720	87,858
1991	20,220	83,001
1992	20,864	78,918
1993	21,591	74,048
1994	22,504	72,155
1995	22,488	68,650
1996	23,139	67,973
1997	23,092	65,422
1998	23,170	62,146

Source:
SSDS001 return

TREASURY

Personal Pensions

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will announce his decision on the abolition of the carry forward/carry back tax rules relating to personal pensions; and if he will make a statement. [101382]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The proposal to remove the carry forward and carry back facility forms part of the current public consultations on stakeholder pensions. We will announce our intentions when we have considered the responses to the consultation.

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the tax relief that will be saved as a result of his proposal to abolish the carry forward/carry back tax rules relating to personal pensions; and if he will make a statement. [101381]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The consultation proposal to remove the carry forward and carry-back facility is intended to simplify pension administration not to raise revenue. We would not expect the removal of carry forward carry back to save tax relief.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much the Exchequer is estimated to receive as pension contributions and compensation this financial

year and in each of the following three years in respect of public sector employees who were mis-sold personal pensions between 1988 and 1994. [100917]

Mr. Andrew Smith: It is estimated that receipts of between £100 and £160 million will be received by the Exchequer this financial year, and in each of the following three years, as a result of public service employees who were mis-sold personal pensions being reinstated into public service pension schemes. The amount of receipts paid in match future liabilities. Any compensation paid into public service schemes will be matched by future benefits to pensioners.

Electric Shock Dog Collars

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many electric shock dog collars Her Majesty's Customs and Excise possess; and how many times they have been used, and on how many dogs, since July 1998. [101435]

Miss Melanie Johnson: HM Customs and Excise do not use collars which administer electric shocks to their dogs.

Appropriation Orders

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library a list of the Transfer of Appropriation Orders applied for by the Commission of the European Union and approved by, or awaiting the approval of, a meeting of a Council of Ministers, indicating for each the *(a)* budget reference purpose and amount of the original appropriation, *(b)* reason why it was not spent on the proposed purpose, *(c)* purpose for which it is to be spent and *(d)* parliamentary scrutiny to which it was subject. [101625]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Details of all transfers of appropriations dated up to 30 June 1999 have been deposited and are available in the House of Commons Library. Transfers since that date will be deposited in compliance with the usual procedures.

"Europe as an Economic Entity"

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will deposit in the Library a copy of the Commission report, "Europe as an economic entity"; and if he will make a statement on policy thereto. [101027]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The 1996 Commission report "The mutually beneficial effects of greater co-ordination of economic and structural policies (Europe as an economic entity)" presented a study of the employment history of the EU. The report highlighted the importance of the European single market for growth and employment across Europe and underlined the need for further structural reforms to Europe's product and labour markets. A copy of the report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Tax Rate

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire will benefit from the 10p tax rate; and if he will make a statement. [101139]

Dawn Primarolo: Almost all of the individual income taxpayers in Shrewsbury and Atcham and in Shropshire will benefit from the 10p tax rate.

Capital Gains Tax

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many businesses in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire will benefit from the reduction in capital gains tax; and if he will make a statement. [101128]

Dawn Primarolo: My right hon. Friend announced in the Pre-Budget Report that he would be consulting on the detail of a number of possible changes to the capital gains tax treatment of business assets. Any changes to capital gains tax would apply to all qualifying businesses in the area, but we have no specific figures for these.

Adlearn Foundation

Mr. Colman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on progress of the Inland Revenue investigation into the Adlearn Foundation. [100862]

Mr. Timms: The Inland Revenue has a statutory duty of confidentiality in respect of all taxpayer's affairs. I cannot reveal details of the Department's dealings with any taxpayer.

EU Pensions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the current pensions liabilities of the European Communities; and what reforms to a private-based system are under consideration. [101035]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by the Economic Secretary on 3 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 238W.

The Council has formally invited the Commission to present an assessment of future needs resulting from the pension scheme as well as a proposal to revise the scheme, by the end of June 2000.

Any reforms to a private-based system would have to be proposed by the Commission and they have not yet made any proposals for us to consider.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families are projected to benefit from the working families tax credit for each of the first five years. [101329]

Mr. Timms: It is estimated that for 2000–01, the first full year of the Working Families Tax Credit, about 1.4 million families will be in receipt of the credit.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many calls have been received by the Working Families Tax Credit Hotline since its inception from *(a)* Worcester, *(b)* Worcestershire, *(c)* from the West Midlands Region and *(d)* nationally. [100904]

Mr. Timms: The response line for the Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Person's Tax Credit had handled 780,000 inquiries up to the 30 November. In the Central TV region the response line had handled about 120,000 calls. A more detailed breakdown is not available.

Children's Fund

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many children in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire will benefit from the new Children's Fund; and if he will make a statement.

[101125]

Mr. Timms: In the 1999 Pre-Budget Report, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that the Government will set up a new Children's Fund in the spending review in 2000. The Fund will support pioneering work by voluntary and community sector organisations working with low-income children and their families, building on the sector's access to communities and families that the statutory sector struggles to engage. The review will take place in forthcoming months and as yet resources have not been allocated to the Fund, but we expect children from all over England to benefit from the activities it will support.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 7 December 1999

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Committee Room Facilities

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee how many of the main committee rooms of the House have induction loop facilities for the hard of hearing; and if these facilities are available on each occasion when a committee room is used. [101615]

Mrs. Roe: Fifteen committee rooms in the House of Commons are fitted with induction loops. These facilities are only available when the amplification equipment has been switched on by a trained operator for meetings that are being televised or recorded.

Lift Refurbishment

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what was the cost of the recent refurbishment of two lifts in Norman Shaw North. [101457]

Sir Sydney Chapman: The estimated cost for the refurbishment of lifts HOP122 and 123 at Norman Shaw North is £275,000.

DEFENCE

Procurement

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the original in-service date, *(b)* the current in-service date, *(c)* the actual or estimated cost, *(d)* the years of peak expenditure and *(e)* the prime contractor for the Endorsed Staff Targets for (1) Future Offensive Air System, (2) Bowman, (3) Barmine Replacement, (4) Area Weapon Effects Simulator, (5) Future Short and Very Short Range Air Defence Systems (SHORADS/VSHORADS), (6) Combined Arms Tactical Trainer, (7) Terrier, (8) Range Extension for Tactical Trunk Communications, (9) Future Engineer Tank, (10) Lightweight Mobile Artillery Weapon System (LIMAWS), (11) Next Generation Light Anti Tank Weapon (NLAW), (12) Formation Battle Management System, (13) Theatre Wide Area Communications Network (TWACN), (14) Future Carrier-Borne Aircraft, (15) Future Amphibious Support Helicopter, (16) SCOT Capability Upgrade (SCUG), (17) Naval EHF Satellite Terminal (NEST) Communication Programme, (18) Electronic Warfare Database and Rapid Reaction Facility, (19) Sonar 2087 and (20) EW 2000. [98481]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The information requested is as follows:

The basis for setting and approving in-service dates (ISDs) is currently under review in the context of the Smart Procurement Initiative. It should also be noted that costs quoted are for acquisition only, expressed in constant prices at 1999–2000 levels.

1. *Future Offensive Air System (FOAS)*—The original in-service date (ISD) was 2015. The current ISD is 2017. The current cost estimate is about £10 billion, though this should be seen as a broad estimate only. Years of peak expenditure are expected to be 2017–18 and 2018–19. The FOAS project is currently in the Concept phase. Contractors for the Concept phase studies include British Aerospace and Matra BAe Dynamics (UK).

2. *BOWMAN*—The original ISD was 1995. The current ISD is 2002, but this is under review. The current cost estimate is around £2.2 billion and the years of peak expenditure are expected to be 2002–03 and 2003–04. The prime contractor is ARCHER Communications Systems Ltd.

3. *BARMINE Replacement*—The original and current ISDs are 2010. The current cost estimate is £54 million, with peak expenditure in 2007–08 and 2008–09. The prime contractor is not yet known.

4. *Area Weapons Effect Simulator*—The original ISD was 1999. The current ISD is 2003. Current estimated costs are £99 million with peak expenditure in 1999–2000 and 2000–01. The prime contractor is Cubic Defense Systems, USA.

5. *Future Short and Very Short Range Air Defence Systems* (now known as Future Ground Based Air Defence—FGBAD)—The original ISD was 2015. The latest estimated ISD is 2020 but this will be considered further in the concept and assessment phases. The current cost estimate is around £4.5 billion. The peaks in expenditure will depend on the decisions made in the concept and assessment phases. The prime contractors for the two International Feasibility Studies—now completed—were Matra BAe Dynamics and Thomson-Thorn Missile Electronics. The planned further Concept work is likely to be placed on the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, who would be supported by the Rapier and High Velocity Missile Design Authorities.

6. *Combined Arms Tactical Trainer*—The original ISD was 2000. The current ISD is 2001. The current estimated cost is £247 million with years of peak expenditure in 1997–98 to 2001–02. The prime contractor is Lockheed Martin Information Systems.

7. *TERRIER*—The original ISD was 2005. The current ISD is 2009. Information on the current cost estimate is commercially sensitive and is being withheld under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The two prime contractors for the competitive Project Definition phase are Vickers Defence Systems and Marconi Marine Land and Naval Systems.

8. *Range Extension for Tactical Trunk Communications*—We have assumed that this is a reference to the satellite extension to the PTARMIGAN trunk communications system which was brought into

service in September 1997 at an actual cost of £24.5 million. The prime contractor was Siemens Plessey and peak years of expenditure were 1995–96.

9. *Future Engineer Tank*—The original ISD was 2001. The current ISD is 2006. Information on cost estimates is commercially sensitive and is being withheld under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The three contractors for the competitive Feasibility studies are Vickers Defence Systems, Alvis Vehicles and Obrum, Poland.

10. *Lightweight Mobile Artillery Weapons System (LIMAWS)*—The original and current ISD is 2007 for the howitzer only. The other elements of the system are not yet sufficiently defined. Information on cost estimates is commercially sensitive and is being withheld under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The prime contractor is Marconi Marine Land and Naval Systems.

11. *Next Generation Light Anti-Tank Weapon (NLAW)*—The original and current ISD is 2006. Information on cost estimates is commercially sensitive and is being withheld under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The two prime contractors for the competitive Project Definition phase are Matra BAe Dynamics (UK) Ltd. and Bofors Carl Gustaf AB (Sweden).

12. *Formation Battle Management System (FBMS)*—The original and current ISD is 2002. The project is, however, linked with BOWMAN and revisions to that programme could impact on the ISD of FBMS. The current estimated costs are £74 million with peak expenditure in years 2001–02 to 2004–05. The prime contractor is British Aerospace Defence Systems Ltd.

13. *Theatre Wide Area Communications Network (TWACN)*—The TWACN original and current ISD is 2002. The cost estimate is commercially sensitive and is withheld under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. Expenditure is likely to peak in 2001–02 to 2004–05 once a prime contractor has been identified.

14. *Future Carrier Borne Aircraft (FCBA)*—The original and current ISD is 2012. Overall FCBA numbers and hence the total cost of the programme, which could be in the region of £5 billion to £7 billion, have yet to be determined. Peak expenditure is likely to occur in 2013–14 and 2014–15. We are participating in the Concept Demonstration Phase (CDP) of the US Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) programme. Lockheed Martin and Boeing are the prime contractors for JSF CDP, with several UK companies as sub-contractors. We are also undertaking feasibility studies covering navalisation of Eurofighter, other potential solutions and various ship/aircraft interface issues. A number of contracts have been placed with UK industry as part of these UK feasibility studies.

15. *Future Amphibious Support Helicopter (FASH)*—The provisional ISD is 2008. The current estimate of costs is around £1 billion with peak expenditure estimated to be in years 2009–10 to 2010–11. The prime contractor is not yet known.

16. *SCOT Capability Upgrade (SCUG)*—The original ISD was 2004. The current ISD is 2005. The cost estimate is commercially sensitive and is withheld under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. Expenditure is likely to peak in 2005–06 and 2006–07. A prime contractor has yet to be identified.

17. *Naval EHF Satellite Terminal (NEST)*—The original ISD was 2004, the current ISD is 2005. The cost estimate is commercially sensitive and is withheld under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. Expenditure is likely to peak in 2004–05 and 2005–06. A prime contractor has yet to be identified.

18. *Electronic Warfare Database and Rapid Reaction Facility*—There is at present no formal user requirement for this programme.

19. *Sonar 2087*—The original ISD was 2003. The current ISD is 2004. Current estimated cost is around £390 million with peak expenditure expected in years 2003–04 and 2006–07. The prime contractors are Thomson Marconi Sonar Ltd. and Babcock Defence Systems.

20. *EW 2000*—The original and current ISD is 2006. Cost estimates are commercially sensitive and withheld under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. Likely peak years of expenditure are 2003–04 to 2005–06. A prime contractor has yet to be identified.

Human Rights Act 1998

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps are being taken to ensure that the current terms of service of young people in the armed forces are compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998. [100122]

Mr. Spellar: In line with other public authorities, my Department is taking steps to ensure that all personnel policies will be compatible with the main provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998 when they fully come into force on 2 October 2000.

Smart Procurement Initiative

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of the Smart Procurement Initiative. [101194]

Mr. Hoon: This initiative, which is at the heart of our efforts to reform the way we procure and support defence equipment, is currently being implemented. The programme to roll out Integrated Project Teams (IPTs) with full industry participation is on course; all the teams will be fully operational by April 2000. The design and implementation of new arrangements to ensure effective relationships between IPTs, their new Equipment Capability Customer in MOD Headquarters and the Front Line Commands is also making excellent progress. We remain on track to achieve savings of £2 billion to which we are committed.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research

results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100146]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The Ministry of Defence conducts research on a wide range of matters. Details are not all recorded centrally, but information available indicates that since May 1997 the Ministry of Defence has placed over 740 research contracts at a total value of over £250 million, excluding those let by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA). DERA has, in addition, placed some £300 million worth of extramural contracts on behalf of the Department. The total number of DERA contracts placed is not readily available. I am withholding the value of individual research contracts under exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, as this information is commercially sensitive.

The Department generally retains control over the publication of research results, and the date of publication, except where ownership of results of work has been vested in contractors. There is no prohibition on publication except where justified under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. MOD and DERA would not seek to change the results of research.

Departmental Staff Targets

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will publish the seventh annual edition of the compendium of current staff targets and staff requirements. [101398]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The MOD is working towards publication, and aims to issue an updated Compendium early in the new year. Since publication of the last Compendium in September 1998, the Department has undergone major organisational change in the implementation of the Strategic Defence Review. We wish to ensure that the Compendium will represent an accurate view to industry of future equipment needs throughout the MOD.

Iraq

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what reports he has received regarding the demolition of Iraqi munitions at the Khamisiyah depot in March 1991 and its possible effect on British troops; and if he will make a statement. [102057]

Mr. Spellar: The Government's 1997 'New Beginnings' policy statement set out the way forward for addressing the health concerns of Gulf veterans and included a statement of the MOD's commitment to review specific events in response to Gulf veterans' concerns that they were exposed to chemical weapons during the Gulf Conflict. The work reviewing the incident at Khamisiyah in March 1991 has now been completed and I am today publishing a detailed paper entitled "Review of the events concerning 32 Field Hospital and the Release of Nerve Agent Arising from US Demolition of Iraqi Munitions at the Khamisiyah Depot in March 1991". In conjunction with this I am also publishing a detailed paper to provide the background of how chemical warfare defence was organised in the UK during the Gulf conflict entitled "British Chemical Warfare Defence During the Gulf Conflict 1990–91)". Copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

As a result of our review of the information on the Khamisiyah incident, we do not believe there is evidence that any UK troops were definitely exposed to Iraqi chemical agents on 10 or 11 March 1991. Although some British troops were located within the computer modelled composite plume footprint, such theoretical exposure would have been at a very low level. We judge that if such an exposure took place it would present no risk to health.

Kosovo

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions the United Kingdom exercised a national veto on proposed actions during NATO operations connected with Kosovo in 1999. [101336]

Mr. Hoon: The reply I gave to a similar question from the hon. Member on 30 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 85W, explained that NATO decisions are taken by consensus and outlined the procedure for consultation by national commanders in support of Alliance decision-making. Releasing details of the applications of these processes in specific operations would be harmful to defence, security and international relations. I am therefore withholding the information requested in accordance with exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on access to Government Information.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what articles of international law and international humanitarian law were used as the criteria for the United Kingdom's decisions establishing the legality of the choice of targets during the Kosovo conflict. [101335]

Mr. Hoon: The United Kingdom complied with the requirements of international law in its conduct of air operations in the Kosovo conflict, including its obligations under Articles 48 to 58 of the First Protocol additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the amounts and types of ordnance used *(a)* during the Kosovo conflict in 1999 and *(b)* over Iraq in 1999. [101337]

Mr. Hoon: During the period in question, the Royal Air Force used the following munitions in support of operations Allied Force and Bolton:

Kosovo (Op Allied Force)

226—Paveway II

18—Paveway III

531—RBL 755

230—1000lb Bombs

6—Alarm

Iraq (Op Bolton)

125—Paveway II

9—Paveway III.

I am withholding the information requested in respect of the Royal Navy's use of munitions during operation Allied Force under exemption 1 of the code of Practice on access to Government Information (National Security or Defence).

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what controls his Department exercises over the storage of nuclear weapons on private land. [101461]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence does not store nuclear weapons on private land.

Uranium-based Munitions

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the environmental effects of the use of uranium-based munitions by NATO forces in Kosovo. [101200]

Mr. Spellar: The Government have not commissioned any assessment of the environmental effects of using such munitions in Kosovo but the Joint UN Environment Programme/UN Commission on Human Settlements issued its report "The Kosovo Conflict: Consequences for the Environment" on 5 October 1999. A copy of the report has been placed in the Library of the House. We are aware, however, of the concerns that have been expressed about the use of uranium-based munitions and have commissioned advice from officials within the Department on what further work we might do to improve our knowledge of how depleted uranium in ammunition behaves in the natural environment.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Mobile Phone Reception (Scotland)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those areas of the west coast of Scotland not covered for mobile phone reception. [99616]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested is not collected.

The cellular mobile operators have each met requirements to roll out services to an area in which at least 90 per cent. of the UK population lives. Aside from this requirement, the individual operators were free to make a commercial decision about their roll-out plans.

Vodafone and BT Cellnet are jointly currently constructing a mobile infrastructure within the Highlands and Islands, working alongside the local enterprise council.

Assisted Area Status

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria were used in selecting wards eligible for assisted area status in Dumfries and Galloway; and what values were attached to each of the criteria for each ward. [100849]

Mr. Caborn: We used the criteria set out in Annex C of the "Government's Proposals for New Assisted Areas", which were published on 15 July. A copy was sent to every MP.

The Government have not published ward-based information as it could be disclosive of personal information.

ECGD

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the UK companies which have received support from the ECGD in each of the last five years. [100517]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 1 December 1999]:* The companies are herewith listed.

The lists do not include the thousands of UK sub-contracts who have benefited from ECGD cover provided either to a UK main contractor or to a bank which makes payment to a number of UK exporters on behalf of overseas buyers. They do however include the UK Branches of overseas companies who have been the beneficiaries of ECGD guarantees.

List of UK companies receiving ECGD cover in 1994–95

Air Products plc
Allmakes Limited
Alstom UK Limited
BICC Cables Ltd. & BICC plc
British Aerospace Defence Systems Ltd.
British Aerospace Public Limited Co.
British Steel Exports Ltd.
Britten-Norman Ltd.
Bronx Engineering Company Limited
BWE Ltd.
Crown Agents Services Limited
Duntech Irrigation Services Limited
Edmund Nuttall Ltd.
Fokker Aircraft BV
General Electric Company plc
Granger Telecommunication Systems Limited
International Aeradio Ltd.
International Generics Limited
Kvaerner Construction International Ltd.
Land Rover Exports Limited
Marconi Communications International Ltd.
Mivan Engineering Limited
Nortel plc
NWB Aerospace 100 Limited
Park Air Electronics Limited
Peter Brotherhood Ltd.
Philip Harris International Ltd.
Plasticisers Engineering Ltd.
Racal Avionics Limited
Racal Group Services Limited
Racal Radio Limited
Raytheon Systems Ltd.
Rolls-Royce plc
Royal Ordnance plc
Terex Equipment Ltd.
TTSI Limited
Weir Westgarth Ltd.
Wellman Furnaces Ltd.
Westinghouse Signals Ltd.
York International Limited

List of UK companies receiving ECGD cover in 1995–96

Air Products plc
Allen Power Engineering Ltd.
Alstom Controls Limited
Alstom Power Plants Limited
Alstom T&D Distribution Switchgear Ltd.
AMEC plc
APV Baker Ltd.
APV UK plc
Balfour Beatty Limited
Biwater International Limited
British Aerospace (Systems & Equipment) Limited
British Aerospace Defence Systems Ltd.
Carnaudmetalbox Engineering plc
Continental FSW Limited
Crabtree of Gateshead Limited
Crosrol Ltd.
Crown Agents Services Limited
Fletcher Smith Ltd.
Flexsys Rubber Chemicals Limited
GEC-Marconi In-flight Systems Overseas Limited
General Electric Company plc
Heaton Power Ltd.
International Combustion Limited
Invensys plc
Jetstream Aircraft Inc.
Kvaerner Construction Group Ltd.
Lloyds TSB Bank plc
MC (1999) Ltd.
Marconi Communications International Holdings Ltd.
Mirrlees Blackstone Ltd
Mistui & Co. UK plc
Nibek Ltd.
Nortel plc
PRCS Ltd.
Procurement Services International Limited
Racal Avionics Limited
Reynolds Boughton (Devon) Ltd.
Rolls-Royce plc
Royal Ordnance plc
Sony Broadcast & Communications Ltd.
VA Tech Peebles Transformers Limited
Weir Pumps Ltd.

List of UK companies receiving ECGD cover in 1996–97

Airsys ATM Limited
Alpha Airports Group plc
Alstom UK Ltd.
AMEC Power Limited
APV Baker Ltd.
APV UK plc
Atlas Converting Equipment plc
AVO International Ltd.
Balfour Beatty Construction International Limited
Balfour Beatty Limited
Biwater International Limited
Bovis International Ltd.
Britech Europe Ltd.
British Aerospace (Military Aircraft) Limited
British Aerospace Defence Systems Ltd.
British Aerospace Public Limited Co.
British Aerospace Regional Aircraft SA
BTR plc
Cadbury Schweppes plc
Clarke Chapman Limited
Clifton & Baird Limited
Crosrol Ltd.
Davy McKee (Poole) Ltd.
Edmund Nuttall Ltd.
EFCO Ltd.
Fenner International Ltd.
Fokker Aircraft BV
Foster Wheeler (GB) Ltd.
General Electric Company plc
General Vacuum Equipment Limited
Harlow Chemical Company Limited
Heaton Power Ltd.
Houchin Aerospace Ltd.
HSBC Bank plc
IMI Overseas Investments Ltd.
International Gas Apparatus Limited
International Hospitals Group Ltd.
Invensys plc
Kvaerner Construction International Ltd.
Kvaerner Process Technology Ltd.
Land Rover Exports Limited
Lloyds TSB Bank plc
M. W. Kellogg Limited
Marconi Communications International Holdings Ltd.
Marubeni Europower Ltd.
Matra Marconi Space UK Ltd.
MB Overseas Investments Ltd.
Merita Bank plc
Mirrlees Blackstone Ltd.
Motorola Ltd.
National Power plc
NCR Financial Solutions Group Ltd.
Nokia Telecommunications Ltd.
PRCS Ltd.
Procurement Services International Limited
Relay Engineering Services Ltd.
Rieter-Scragg Limited
Rolls-Royce plc
Samplex Ltd.
SHS Handling Systems Limited
Simon Access (UK) Ltd.
Standard Chartered Bank
Sungard Business Systems Inc.
Tate & Lyle Overseas Ltd.
Thames Water Overseas Ltd.
Thames Water plc
T. H. Dixon & Co. Ltd.
Tecquipment Ltd.
Thompson Friction Welding Limiyrf
Trafalgar House Construction (Asia) Ltd.
VA Tech Peebles Transformers Limited
Vosper Thornycroft (UK) Limited
Weir Pumps Ltd.

List of UK companies receiving ECGD cover in 1997–98

AIC (Europe) Limited
Airsys ATM Limited
Alcatel Submarine Networks Ltd.
Allen Power Engineering Ltd.
Alstom Traction Ltd.
Alstom UK Ltd.
AMEC International Construction Ltd.
AMEC Power Limited
AMEC Property and Overseas Investment Ltd.
Amphenol Limited
APV Baker Ltd.
APV Ltd.
Atlantic Power & Gas Engineering Limited
Aerotest plc
Babcock King-Wilkinson Limited
Balfour Beatty Construction International Limited
Balfour Beatty Projects & Engineering Ltd.
Balmoral Group Limited
British Aerospace (Operations) Limited
British Aerospace Defence Systems Ltd.
British Aerospace Public Limited Co.
British Aerospace Regional Aircraft SA
BUPA Investment Overseas Ltd.
Chemtech International Limited
Chiyoda-Foster Wheeler Partnership
Citibank NA
Coflexip Stena Offshore Limited
Continental FSW Limited
Crabtree of Gateshead Limited
Crosrol Ltd.
Denco Ltd.
Dunlop Oil & Marine Limited
Ericsson Limited
Eurotherm Process Automation Limited
Fairbank Brearley Ltd.
GE Energy (UK) Ltd.
General Electric Company plc
Houchin Aerospace Ltd.
Kennedy & Donkin Ltd.
Kvaerner Cleveland Bridge Limited
Kvaerner Construction International Ltd.
Kvaerner Metals Davy Ltd.
Kvaerner Oilfield Products Limited
Kvaerner Process (UK) Ltd.
Land Rover Exports Limited
Mabey & Johnson Ltd.
Marconi (Projects) Ltd.
Marconi Avionics Limited
Marconi Avionics Overseas Limited
Marconi Radar Projects Limited
Matra Bae Dynamic (UK) Ltd.
Matra Marconi Space UK Ltd.
MC (1999) Ltd.
Mitsui Babcock Energy Services Limited
NSG Exports Limited
Pirelli General plc
Polygraphica Equipment Limited
Purac Ltd.
Racal Radio Limited
Rieter-Scragg Limited
Rockwell-Collins (UK) Limited
Rolls-Royce (European Investments) Ltd.
Rolls-Royce Industrial Power (India) Limited
Rolls-Royce (Overseas Holdings) Ltd.
Rolls-Royce Industrial and Marine Gas Turbines Ltd.
Rolls-Royce plc
Royal Ordnance plc
Siemens plc
SNC-Lavalin Europe Limited
Spencer & Halstead Ltd.
Standrange Ltd.
Starfrost (UK) Limited
Tate & Lyle Overseas Ltd.
T. Giusti Ltd.
Taylor Woodrow Construction Limited
Thames Water International Services Ltd.
Thames Water plc
Trafalgar House Construction (Asia) Ltd.
Tweedy Engineering Limited
TWI/Skanska JV
Tetra Pak UK Limited
VA Tech Reyrolle Limited
VA Tech Wabag UK Limited
VAI Industries (UK) Ltd.
Vosper Thornycroft (UK) Limited
Webtex Limited
Weir Westgarth Ltd.

List of UK companies receiving ECGD cover in 1998–99

ABB Alstom Power UK Ltd.
ABN Amro Bank NV
Adtranz Signal (UK) Ltd.
AF-QPS Limited
Allen Steam Turbines
Alstom Automation International Ltd.
Alstom UK Ltd.
AMEC International Construction Ltd.
ANZ Grindlays Export Finance Ltd.
Balfour Beatty International Limited
Balfour Beatty Limited
Balfour Beatty Projects & Engineering Ltd.
Balfour Kilpatrick Limited
Banco Santander Central Hispano
Baesema Limited
Bechtel Limited
Biwater International Limited
Biwater plc
Bricesco Limited
Briggs of Burton
British Arab Commercial Bank Ltd.
British Aerospace Public Limited Co.
BUPA Investments Overseas Ltd.
Carmichael International Limited
Chase Manhattan plc
Coflexip Stena Offshore Limited

Credit Lyonnais
Dennis
Deutsche Bank
Dresdner Bank
Edmund Nuttall Ltd.
Fenner International Ltd.
F. G. Wilson (Engineering) Ltd.
GEC-Marconi Radar and Defence Systems Ltd.
General Electric Company plc
Invensys plc
L. C. Bamford Excavators Ltd.
Klockner INA Industrial Plants Limited
Kvaerner Construction International Ltd.
Kvaerner Metals Davy Limited
Kvaerner Process plc
Land Rover Exports Limited
Marconi (Projects) Ltd.
Marconi Avionics Overseas Limited
Marconi Communications International Limited
Marconi Radar Projects Limited
Matcon Limited
Matra Marconi Space UK Ltd.
MC (1999) Ltd.
Mirrlees Blackstone Ltd.
Mitsui Babcock Energy Ltd.
Motherwell Bridge Projects Ltd.
Nortel plc
Paralloy Limited
Posford Duvivier Consulting Engineers
Racal Defence Electronics Limited
Racal Radio Limited
Rolls-Royce Power Ventures (Ankara) Ltd.
Rolls-Royce Power Ventures Ltd.
Rolls-Royce plc
SCS Shipping Ltd
SHS Handling Systems Limited
Siemens plc
Sir William Halcrow & Partners Limited
Speedex Engineering Limited
Standrange Ltd.
TBS Engineering Limited
Trade Credit Finance No. 1 Limited
Trafalgar House Construction (Asia) Ltd.
USF Limited
Vickers Engineering plc
Vikoma International Ltd.
Volvo Bus Export (UK) Ltd.
Vosper Thornycroft (UK) Limited
William Cook Burton Ltd.
Wood Group Engineering Ltd.

Industrial Diseases

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the number of applicants in the following age bands who have made a claim for payment in respect of vibration white finger and chronic bronchitis and emphysema aged *(a)* 49 and below, *(b)* 50 to 59, *(c)* 60 to 69, *(d)* 70 to 79, *(e)* 80 to 89 and *(f)* 90 years and above. [101048]

Mrs. Liddell: As at 30 November, the age breakdown of claims made by ex-miners in respect of claims for compensation for VWF and respiratory disease is as follows:

Aged	*Number*
Respiratory disease claims received	
49 and below	6,558
50–59	12,348
60–69	25,311
70–79	30,202
80–89	11,047
90 and above	2,556
VWF claims received	
49 and below	15,780
50–59	13,364
60–69	14,382
70–79	8,414
80–89	925
90 and above	20

Telecommunications Council

Mr. Jim Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the outcome of the Telecommunications Council held in Brussels on 30 November; and if he will make a statement. [101168]

Ms Hewitt: I represented the UK at the Telecommunications Council on 30 November which adopted a Directive on a Common Framework for Electronic Signatures. I welcomed this as a major step forward towards clarifying the legal framework for electronic commerce.

In addition the Commission presented a number of recent Communications which were followed by preliminary exchanges of views.

In presenting the fifth report on implementation of the telecommunications regulatory package the Commission drew attention to progress towards implementation of the existing package of telecoms liberalisation legislation, and concluded that the successes of the existing regulatory framework had led to market growth with increased competition and lower tariffs. The Commission also drew attention to the remaining barriers to a single European market in telecoms, including a comparatively low level of harmonisation of Community licensing and interconnection regimes, incomplete implementation by some member states of Community cost accounting provisions, and the lack of competition in local access markets in all member states. Member states approved this general analysis.

There was a first debate on the Commission Communication on the review of the regulatory framework for electronic communications. In presenting the Communication the Commission summarised its approach to the review of the regulatory package which would apply to all electronic communications systems and said it would report on the outcome of its public consultation in April before making legislative proposals in May. In the following debate all member states

recognised the need for swift action in the face of the pace of technological change, and simplification of the regulatory framework. A number, including the UK, stressed the need for a flexible framework with a minimum of regulation. I emphasised that strengthening competition in the market for communications services is vital to produce an environment in which e-commerce can flourish in Europe, and welcomed the Commission's recognition that regulation should be on a co-regulatory basis with business where possible. The Council adopted Conclusions endorsing the Commission's principles for the new regulatory framework as set out in its Communication.

The Commission also presented its Communication on the results of its public consultation on its Green Paper on radio spectrum policy. The Commission summarised the outcome of its consultation and the areas in which it indicated future legislative proposals. There was no discussion of the Communication: the Presidency concluded that the Council noted the Commission's intentions which would require further study when specific legislative proposals emerged in 2000.

There was also a debate on the information society of the future and how to build trust and create effective rules for electronic commerce. The Commission will produce guidelines on the use of self-regulation in this area for discussion at the Information Society meeting in Lisbon in April 2000.

The Council also noted, without discussion, the Commission Communication on implementation of Directive 97/47/EC on advanced TV standards. The Commission also provided an oral update on member states' preparation for the Millennium Bug in energy, transport and other fields.

Post Office White Paper

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will define the phrase, "undue cross-subsidy", in paragraph 28 of the Post Office White Paper. [101289]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The phrase "undue cross-subsidy" refers to any cross-subsidy from the monopoly to non-monopoly services which is intended or has the effect of being a breach of competition rules. It will be for the Postal Services Commission to regulate this and to make decisions based on the facts of any particular case.

Joint Infrastructure Fund

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he intends to announce awards from round 2 of the Joint Infrastructure Fund. [101685]

Mr. Byers: I have today announced jointly with the Wellcome Trust and the Higher Education Funding Council for England details of the awards from round 2 of the Joint Infrastructure Fund (JIF). Over £320 million has been awarded to 45 successful applicants across 27 universities across the United Kingdom.

The projects awarded funding cover the broad spectrum of science and engineering. They range from projects costing £750,000 to over £30 million.

There are a further 3 rounds of the JIF with decision points in March and November 2000 and March 2001.

Details of the individual awards announced today are as follows:

Applicant		*Project*
Professor I. G. Priede	Aberdeen	Autonomous Marine Environment Research Stations (AutoMERS)
Professor P. St. J. Russell	Bath	Photonic Crystal Fibres: Fabrication, Technology and Applications
Professor H. R. Saibil	Birkbeck	Equipment and Refurbishment for Electron Cryomicroscopy and Protein Crystallography
Professor M. N. R. Ashfold	Bristol	Materials, Physical and Computational Chemistry for the 21st Century
Professor R. J. Mair	Cambridge	Centre for Geotechnical Process and Construction Modelling
Professor D. M. Glover	Cambridge	Cell Biology and Drosophilia Research in the Cambridge University Genetics Department
Professor Sir John Gurdon	Cambridge	Relocation and upgrading of Wellcome CRC Institute
Professor P. Sissons	Cambridge	Biology and Pathogenesis of Virus Infections
Professor T. W. Robbins	Cambridge	Centre for Behavioural Neuroscience
Professor D. G. Crighton	Cambridge	Centre for Mathematical Sciences
Professor A. J. Moses	Cardiff	Production, Evaluation and Applications of Advanced Soft Magnetics Materials and Devices
Professor A. I. Lamond	Dundee	Dundee Centre for High Resolution Imaging in Cell and Molecular Biology
Professor R. W. Richards	Durham	Multi-disciplinary Condensed Matter Chemistry
Professor T. D. Jickells	UEA	Laboratory for Global Marine and Atmospheric Chemistry
Dr. K. J. Heywood	UEA	Sampling Equipment for the UK Marine, Physics and Chemistry Community
Professor R. D. Kenway	Edinburgh	A World-Leading Computing Facility for Simulations of the Strong Interaction
Professor P. J. Sadler	Edinburgh	Edinburgh Protein Interaction Centre (EPIC)
Professor N. P. Franks	ICSTM	General Anaesthesia: From Molecular Actions to Neuronal Pathways
Professor M. Van Heel	ICSTM	An Integrated Multi-Disciplinary Centre for Solving Biopolymer Structures
Professor P. McGuffin	KCL (Institute of Psychiatry)	The Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Research Centre at the Institute of Psychiatry
Professor M. B. Steer	Leeds	Microwave and Millimetre-Wave Design and Instrumentation Facility
Dr. M. C. Bell	Leeds	Leeds Health Air Pollution, Noise, Health and Emissions Research Network (LANTERN)
Professor P. K. H. Maguire	Leicester	The Acquisition of Seismic Recording Systems to study "Rifting Processes: Inception, Transition and Spreading"
Professor P. P. Allport	Liverpool	The Liverpool Semiconductor Detector Centre

Applicant		*Project*
Professor J. S. Metcalfe	Manchester	Manchester Federal School Interdisciplinary Faculty for Management Research
Professor D. J. Vaughan	Manchester	Research Centre in Molecular Environmental Science
Professor A. J. Lyne	Manchester	Lovell Telescope—Forward to the 21st Century
Professor M. P. Young	Newcastle	Visual Neuroecology
Professor A. Ekert	Oxford	Interdisciplinary Centre for Quantum Information Processing
Dr. A. Cooper	Oxford	Ancient Biomolecules Centre
Professor W. G. Richards	Oxford	Chemistry Research Laboratory
Dr. B. T. Huffman	Oxford	Tevraton—Quick Access Resources for Computing T-Quarc
Professor R. A. North	Sheffield	Integrated Research in Molecular Life Sciences: co-ordinating Structural Biology, Developmental Genetics, Molecular Physiology and Molecular Microbiology
Professor D. J. Read	Sheffield	Plant Environmental Interactions: Scaling between Genes and Ecosystems
Dr. N. J. C. Spooner	Sheffield	British Underground Facility for Dark Matter and Neutrino Studies
Professor M. Bradley	Southampton	Combinatorial Centre of Excellence
Professor M. F. Land	Sussex	Refurbishment of Sussex Centre for Neuroscience
Professor E. A. Hinds	Sussex	Centre for the Measurement of Particle Electric Dipole Moments
Professor P. R. Jonas	UMIST	An Instrumented Aircraft Facility for Atmospheric Research within the UK University Community
Professor L. E. Davis	UMIST	Electromagnetics Centre for Microwave and Millimetre-Wave Design and Applications
Professor J. Collinge	UCL	Neurodegenerative diseases—from Molecule to Clinic
Professor L. K. Borysiewicz	Wales (College of Medicine)	Centre for Biomedical Research
Professor D. Bowles	York	Creating a New Research Infrastructure for Biosciences
Professor S. K. Bhattacharya	Warwick	Warwick Design and Innovation Research Centre (Innovative Manufacturing Centre Phase 3)

Note:
The JEC approved a total of 45 awards but support for one of these is dependent on a further site visit. Details of this award have therefore not been announced yet.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on plans for operating the national minimum wage. [101509]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government asked the independent Low Pay Commission to monitor and evaluate the operation of the national minimum wage, with particular reference to its impact on pay, employment and competitiveness in low paying sectors and small firms. I look forward to reading the Commission's findings, which will be included in their report to the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State later this month, and we will consider carefully the recommendations it makes.

Entertainment Industry

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact of the Employment Relations Act 1999 on the working of the entertainment industry. [101087]

Mr. Alan Johnson: No regulatory proposal which has an impact on businesses, charities or voluntary bodies is considered by the Government without a thorough assessment of the risks, costs and benefits, a clear analysis of who will be affected and an explanation of why non-regulatory action would be insufficient. These effects are examined in Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs), which are published with legislative proposals.

The RIA which accompanied the Employment Relations Bill calculated a total recurring annual compliance cost to business of £60 million. No figures were prepared for individual sectors such as the entertainment industry. The Act's impact on an individual sector will depend on the scope of existing provision in that sector, whether this provision exceeds the statutory minimum in the Act, and the extent to which individuals take up their rights. However, views were received on the legislation from both management and unions in the entertainment sector.

The compliance costs need to be set against the benefits which the Act is expected to bring, contributing to improvements in employment relations across the economy, stimulating a more co-operative approach and thus contributing to enhanced economic performance, and helping people achieve a better balance between work and family life, with wider long term social benefits.

PLCs (German Takeovers)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many public limited companies in the UK have been taken over by companies based in Germany in each of the last three years. [101360]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Kidgell to Mr. Barry Sheerman, dated 7 December 1999:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your question on the number of public limited companies in the UK that have been taken over by companies based in Germany over the last three years. I am replying in Dr Holt's absence.

The ONS extracts information about acquisitions and mergers from detailed scanning of specialist journals and the financial press. We therefore tend to identify only the larger and/or more newsworthy acquisitions. The figures below may therefore understate the scale of German acquisitions of UK companies.

Year	Number of British Companies taken over
1997	5
1998	1
1999 first three quarters only	4

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

BBC World TV

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received about the removal of current affairs and analysis from BBC World TV programming. [99965]

Janet Anderson: We have received three representations from hon. Members and their constituents. I am afraid however it is a longstanding principle that the Government do not intervene in the BBC's programming and editorial issues, which are matters for the BBC Board of Governors.

ITV Franchises

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his policy is in respect of the amalgamation of companies holding ITV franchises. [101458]

Janet Anderson: Media mergers are subject to general competition law as well as specific ownership provisions under the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996. These are matters for the Independent Television Commission and the Office of Fair Trading.

Works of Art (Export Licences)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many press releases were issued by his Department in relation to the deferral of export licences for works of art *(a)* from May 1997 to June 1998 and *(b)* from June 1998 to date. [101853]

Mr. Chris Smith: Between May 1997 and June 1998, 12 news releases were issued by the Department relating to the deferral of 20 export licences for cultural items.

From June 1998 to date, 15 news releases were issued relating to the deferral of 24 such export licences.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he has taken to publicise his Department's publication, "Export of Works of Art 1998–99". [101852]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) on 26 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 216W, when I said that the Reviewing Committee's Annual Report for 1998–99 was published on that day, and that copies had been laid before Parliament. I also issued a news release on the same day announcing its publication.

Lottery Terminals

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) who will own the lottery terminals which his Department has decided should become obsolete; and what value has been put on them; [101515]

(2) what extra costs will be incurred in terms of the provision of new lottery machines as a consequence of the decision that the existing ones should be replaced; and if this cost falls on *(a)* the sum available for good causes and *(b)* other budgets; [101517]

(3) what were the installation costs of the initial batch of lottery terminals; and what *(a)* direct and *(b)* indirect costs were met from public funds; [101516]

(4) who took the decision to scrap existing lottery terminals. [101514]

Kate Hoey: The decision to require the successful applicant for the new National Lottery licence to install new terminals was taken by the National Lottery Commission. The Commission is independent of Government.

The National Lottery terminals are the property of the National Lottery operator, Camelot Group plc, and will remain Camelot's property when the current operating licence expires. My Department does not hold information on the installation costs or the present value of these terminals. The full cost of purchasing and installing the terminals was met by Camelot from its operating costs: no part of the cost of the terminals was met from public funds.

The National Lottery Commission has a statutory responsibility to ensure that the National Lottery is run with all due propriety, to protect the interests of players, and subject to satisfying those two criteria, to maximise the amount the Lottery raises for good causes. The Commission took the view that a competition is the best way to ensure that the amount raised for good causes is maximised, and therefore insisted on new technology for National Lottery terminals to remove an obstacle to competition. The Commission's decision will have no impact on other budgets.

Indemnity Undertakings

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many indemnity undertakings were given by departments under section 16 of the National Heritage Act 1980 for the six month period ended 30 September; and what was the value of *(a)* any contingent liabilities in respect of such undertakings given at any time under that section which remained outstanding as at 30 September, *(b)* non-statutory Government indemnities in respect of loans handled by the Government Art Collection which remained outstanding as at 30 September and *(c)* non-statutory undertakings to Her Majesty in respect of loans from the Royal Collection which remained outstanding at 30 September. [102029]

Mr. Chris Smith: The provision for the Government Indemnity Scheme is made by the National Heritage Act 1980. The scheme facilitates public access to loans of works of art and other objects for public display made to museums, galleries and other such institutions by private owners and non national institutions. It does this by indemnifying lenders against loss or damage to their loan. Loans covered by the scheme must be for public benefit. The scheme also covers loans of such objects for study purposes within borrowing institutions where this would contribute materially to the public's understanding or appreciation of the loan. Examples of this are enhancing interpretation or explanation to the public of objects or bringing into the public domain the conclusions of any study.

In the six month period ended 30 September 1999, the following undertakings to indemnify were given under section 16 by the relevant Departments for objects on loan to national and non-national institutions:

	Number
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	592
Scottish Executive Education Department	101
The National Assembly for Wales	61
Department of Education for Northern Ireland	18

The value of contingent liabilities in respect of undertakings given at any time under section 16 and which remained outstanding is:

	£
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	1,625,435,897
Scottish Executive Education Department	480,066,111
The National Assembly for Wales	66,972,145
Department for Education for Northern Ireland	8,523,168

The value of non-statutory Government indemnities to cover loans handled by the Government Art Collection and which remained outstanding as at 30 September 1999 is:

Value: £4,475,000.

The value of non-statutory Undertakings given to Her Majesty in respect of loans from the Royal Collection and which remained outstanding as at 30 September 1999 is:

Value: £274,848,263.

PRIME MINISTER

Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister (1) how many times the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee has met in 1999; [101212]

(2) when he expects the next meeting of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee to take place; and what will be on the agenda. [101214]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 5 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 362W.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much his Department has spent on ministerial transport in each of the last two years. [98690]

Mr. Hill: Ministers are required, under the Ministerial Code and "Travel by Ministers", to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. For information on spend on the Government Car Service, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 255–56W.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much his Department has spent on civil servants' transport in each of the last two years. [99147]

Mr. Hill: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 255–56W. This gave details of providing the Government Car Service, which included the costs for Ministers and Ministerial private office expenditure in DETR. All travel undertaken by civil servants in the Department complied with the requirements of the Civil Service Management Code.

The amount paid for other civil servants transport was not retained separately from other travel expenditure on the previous Department of Transport Accounting system which was in use until end of March 1999 so that a combined total for the two Departments for previous years could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what motor mileage allowance rates his Department offers to *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* civil servants using their own vehicles for official business; and what has been the cost of each in each of the last five years. [99148]

Mr. Hill: Ministers, when travelling on official business, may use a private car instead of an official car, and claim mileage allowance in the same circumstances and on the same terms as their civil servants. Use of public transport is encouraged. The Department's aim of minimising journeys by car to reduce the environmental impact of transport activity has been publicised widely. Where public transport is available but a private car is used, a single flat rate of 24 pence per mile is payable. Where it is impracticable to use public transport, payment for the use of a private car is at the rate of 40 pence per mile for the first 4,000 miles regardless of engine size, and 24 pence per mile after that. Claims for payment have to confirm that each journey was arranged in the most cost effective way.

The amount paid for motor mileage was not retained separately from other travel expenditure on the previous Department of Transport accounting system so that a combined total for the two Departments could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Motorcycles (Child Passengers)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many children aged under 16 years regularly travelled as motorcycle pillion passengers in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [100012]

Mr. Hill: No estimate is available. The number of children identified in the National Travel Survey making journeys as motorcycle pillion passengers over the last five years has been too small to give any estimate for the population as a whole.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many children have been *(a)* killed and *(b)* seriously injured whilst riding as a passenger on a motorcycle, in each of the last 10 years. [100010]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the table.

Child motorcycle pillion casualties by severity: GB 1989–98

Casualties

Year	*Fatal*	*Serious*	*Slight*	*All*
1989	0	66	148	214
1990	6	51	147	204
1991	1	34	108	143
1992	1	36	122	159
1993	2	53	130	185
1994	2	54	138	194
1995	0	46	170	216
1996	1	51	130	182
1997	3	48	137	188
1998	0	34	141	175

Corporate Assets

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his estimate is of the value of land and property (i) in Scotland, (ii) in the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) in total within the responsibility of *(a)* the British Railways Board, *(b)* the British Waterways Board, *(c)* the Civil Aviation Authority and *(d)* London Regional Transport (including assets under construction); and what is the value of (1) plant and equipment, (2) vehicles and rolling stock, (3) investments and (4) other moveable assets held by each of these bodies. [99823]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The table which has been placed in the Library sets out the value of land and property (including assets under construction), plant and equipment, vehicles and rolling stock, investments and other assets within the responsibility of the respective bodies set out, as shown in their respective accounts for the year ended 31 March 1999. All figures relate to the group and to the United Kingdom. There were no properties held overseas. Where appropriate, the figure in respect of Scotland has been separately identified. Unless otherwise stated there were no investments held. The net book value should be considered to be current values as at 31 March 1999.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the current estimated value of land and property in (i) Scotland, (ii) the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas, and (iv) in total within the responsibility of *(a)* the Audit Commission, *(b)* the British Board of Agreement, *(c)* the Commission for the New Towns, *(d)* the Countryside Commission, *(e)* English Nature, *(f)* English Partnerships, *(g)* the Environment Agency, *(h)* general lighthouse authorities, *(i)* Trinity House Lighthouse Service, *(j)* Northern Lighthouse Board, *(k)* the Health and Safety Commission and Executive, *(l)* housing action trusts, *(m)* the Housing Corporation, *(n)* the Joint Nature Conservancy Committee, *(o)* the National Forest Company, *(p)* the Rural Development Commission, *(q)* the Traffic Director for London and *(r)* urban development corporations. [99811]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Although not separately identified between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, information on the values of land and property is contained in the tangible fixed assets note of the individually published audited accounts of the bodies concerned. These accounts, which are published either as a White Paper Accounts or in the form of a glossy version, have been laid before Parliament and are available in the Library for inspection. Any additional information could not be provided without delay and without incurring disproportionate cost.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the current value of land and property in (i) Scotland (ii) the United Kingdom (iii) overseas (iv) total within the responsibility of the *(a)* Coastguard Agency, *(b)* Driving Standards Agency, *(c)* Driving and Vehicle Standards Agency, *(d)* Highways Agency, *(e)* Marine Safety Agency, *(f)* Planning Inspectorate Executive Agency, *(g)* QEII Conference Centre, *(h)* Vehicle Certification Agency and *(i)* Vehicle Inspectorate. [99813]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The table which has been placed in the Library sets out the value of land and property within the responsibility of the respective bodies set out, as shown in their respective audited accounts for the year ended 31 March 1999. Marine Safety Agency and the Coastguard Agency formally merged on 1 April 1998. Their figures therefore appear combined. For the avoidance of doubt I should mention that the Driving Standards Agency, the Vehicle Inspectorate and the QEII Conference Centre are trading funds and not executive agencies of DETR. Value information for the Highways Agency is being developed as part of the implementation of resource accounting; this information is currently being audited and is not available. All figures are for the United Kingdom and none for overseas. Where appropriate, the figure in respect of Scotland has been separately identified. The net book value should be considered to be current values as at 31 March 1999.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the current estimated value of land and property in (i) Scotland, (ii) the United Kingdom (iii) overseas and (iv) in total within the responsibility of DETR central; and if he will further list the value of moveable assets within DETR central. [99812]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The table which has been placed in the Library sets out the value of land and property within the responsibility of DETR central and the value of other assets as shown in the Department's dry run resource

accounts for the year ended 31 March 1999. The first year of published resource accounts will be in respect of 1999–2000. All figures relate to England and Wales. No assets are held by DETR Central in Scotland or overseas. The net book value should be considered to be current values as at 31 March 1999.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his estimate is of the value of land and property (i) in Scotland, (ii) in the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) in total held by the Ordnance Survey; and what is the value of moveable assets and other assets held by this body. [99824]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Estimates are as follows:

	£
(i) Value of land and property held by Ordnance Survey in Scotland	[1]0
(ii) Value of land and property held by Ordnance Survey in the United Kingdom	14,950,000
(iii) Value of land and property held by Ordnance Survey overseas	0
(iv) Value of land and property held in total by the Ordnance Survey	[2]14,950,000
(v) Value of moveable assets and other assets held by Ordnance Survey	10,328,000

[1] All office accommodation in Scotland is rented
[2] Same as (ii)

A31

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to increase traffic flow during the current road works on the A31 in the New Forest particularly during weekends; when he expects the road works to be completed; and if he will make a statement. [100522]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. David Atkinson, dated 7 December 1999:

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about roadworks on the A31 in the New Forest.

It is not possible to relax the traffic restrictions on the A31 between Picket Post and Stoney Cross at this stage of the works. Traffic management has been designed to allow for maximum lane availability during peak periods. Greater traffic restrictions are needed at other times to allow the resurfacing and bridge maintenance works to be done safely.

During weekdays, two lanes are provided at peak times in the direction of greatest demand. At weekends, two lanes are provided eastbound from 1600 hrs to 2000 hrs. At all other times, a contraflow of one lane in each direction is used.

The work is due to be completed by 12 December, weather permitting.

Rents

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the standard reference rent established by the Rent Officer Service for each locality within Greater Manchester and Cheshire for four room and five room accommodation in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [100768]

Mr. Mullin: The available annual information is given in the table. Reference rents will differ from one year to the next because of differences in the type and condition of property covered each year. These figures are not included in the publication "Rent Officer Statistics" because the number of cases reported for each locality is too small a basis for reliable quarterly estimates.

Average local reference rents, Greater Manchester and Cheshire

Weekly rent (£)

	Accommodation with four rooms			*Accommodation with five rooms*		
	1996	*1997*	*1998*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Greater Manchester	71.00	71.37	72.20	79.17	79.17	80.81
Manchester	74.17	71.01	75.55	83.34	80.45	85.63
Stockport	87.23	86.96	86.83	93.73	95.04	93.25
Oldham	58.40	60.14	60.59	60.66	64.16	64.96
Tameside	75.67	79.61	76.00	78.94	80.02	81.48
Bolton	63.34	67.31	66.64	68.08	72.22	71.90
Rochdale	60.10	63.35	63.88	62.27	69.80	68.41
Trafford	84.71	86.90	87.82	89.32	92.91	92.49
Bury	59.74	66.21	66.23	63.88	67.80	70.73
Salford	64.64	66.39	67.18	[illegible]	71.58	72.87
Wigan	60.31	66.03	65.49	[illegible]	69.57	70.38
Cheshire	83.72	88.70	88.73	89.94	99.25	97.09
Congleton	[1]77.89	[1]82.67	[1]83.76	[1]76.37	[1]92.86	[1]91.51
Macclesfield	115.90	125.92	121.59	[1]122.85	[1]139.16	[1]127.87
Crewe and Nantwich	67.62	71.28	71.50	78.55	[1]78.04	81.92
Vale Royal	80.44	[1]90.31	93.22	[1]89.53	[1]102.81	[1]105.92
Ellesmere Port and Neston	[1]80.03	[1]83.72	80.00	[1]84.65	[1]99.18	[1]85.94
Warrington	84.88	87.41	93.08	[1]92.50	[1]98.67	[1]103.81
Chester	95.38	[1]105.99	100.03	[1]95.22	[1]115.21	[1]109.81
Halton	74.32	77.94	77.49	[1]80.57	[1]83.90	[1]84.68

[1] Number of cases fewer than 100

Source:
Rent Officer returns

Channel Tunnel

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if safety recommendations to be enacted in accordance with section 37 of the Cologne Conclusions will apply to the Channel Tunnel; and if cost compliance will be included by the UK delegates in working group negotiations. [100996]

Mr. Hill: The Transport Council has yet to consider any recommendations on tunnel safety. However, paragraph 37 of the Cologne Council conclusions refers to road tunnels. It therefore seems likely that any recommendations would not be directly applicable to rail tunnels such as the Channel Tunnel.

The independent, binational Channel Tunnel Safety Authority, which oversees all matters relating to safety in the Channel Tunnel, has studied the various investigations into the Mont Blanc Tunnel fire and has identified no immediate or urgent safety implications for the Channel Tunnel. The Safety Authority will study with interest any recommendations the Transport Council may make, once they are published, to see whether they have any implications for the Tunnel.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the provision of direct rail services between the north west and the rest of Europe via the Channel Tunnel. [101347]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* Such services are the subject of an extensive independent review, the results of which the Deputy Prime Minister is currently considering. A statement will be made in due course.

Road Surfacing

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the value of porous asphalt road surfacing as a means of reducing spray in wet weather. [101136]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Richard Thorndike to Mr. Bob Blizzard, dated 7 December 1999:

You recently asked the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the value of porous asphalt roads surfacing as a means of reducing spray in wet weather. I am replying in the absence of the Chief Executive, Peter Nutt.

Research undertaken by the Highways Agency has assessed the value of using porous asphalt road surfaces, including the benefit of reduced spray. Work carried out in the 1980's has shown that porous asphalt can reduce spray by as much as 95 per cent. compared to conventional asphalt when new. This reduces to approximately 30 per cent. after about three years due to the clogging of the porous asphalt from road detritus. The reduction in spray and the better visibility it offers drivers in wet weather, could be expected to reduce accidents when using porous asphalt compared with conventional surfacing.

However, surveys carried out for the Highways Agency indicate that vehicles travel faster on porous asphalt in the wet than on conventional surfacing which increases the risk of accidents. This work is supported by an extensive accident survey report from the Netherlands. Where porous asphalt is widely used. Their survey demonstrates that porous asphalt was no safer than conventional surfacing. This was attributed to motorists driving at higher speeds on porous asphalt than conventional surfacing due to reduced spray and better visibility. The results of limited work undertaken by the Highways Agency are consistent with evidence collected in Holland.

As part of a strategy to reduce impact of road noise the Highways Agency is carrying out research into alternative types of low noise road surfacing. As a result, new types of surfacing are now being introduced, some of which are often confused with porous asphalt, given their spray suppressing properties. Research on porous asphalt and the new road surfaces is continuing and will include monitoring spray reduction and the benefits offered.

If it would be helpful, Graham Bowskill, our Head of Civil Engineering, would be pleased to discuss the performance of porous asphalt and other road surfacing with you. His telephone number is 0171 921 4746.

Petrol Emissions

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what emissions are produced from the use of a gallon of *(a)* unleaded petrol, *(b)* super unleaded petrol and *(c)* lead replacement petrol. [101093]

Mr. Hill: There is no fundamental difference in emissions produced by any of these grades of petrol, the primary combustion products being carbon dioxide (CO_2) and water vapour. Combustion of one gallon will produce approximately 10.7 kg of CO_2 and 4.3 kg of water. Small amounts of secondary combustion products can also be created, but the actual amounts will vary from vehicle to vehicle depending on the combustion efficiency of the engine in which the fuel is burned and the efficiency of any exhaust gas after-treatment that may be fitted. These secondary pollutants are mainly comprised of hydrocarbons (HC) arising from unburned or partially burned fuel, oxides of nitrogen (NO_x), carbon monoxide (CO) and particulates. Depending on the level of sulphur in the fuel, sulphur compounds can also be produced. Other compounds, resulting from the use of fuel additives such as, for example, potassium that is used in lead replacement petrol, may also be emitted in trace concentrations.

London Underground

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the EDP costs, *(b)* accommodation and telephone costs, *(c)* London Transport finance and HR services charges and *(d)* PFI contract costs incurred by London Underground Ltd. in 1997–98. [100934]

Mr. Hill: Figures for these items were given in my answer of 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 673W.

A more detailed breakdown of the costs referred to could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Seeboard Powerlink Consortium

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many miles of high-tension and control cables *(a)* have been and *(b)* will be transferred to the Seeboard Powerlink consortium under the Power PFI contract. [100932]

Mr. Hill: Under the terms of the Power PFI contract, approximately 1,000 miles each of high-tension and control cables (covering the entire Underground network) transferred to Seeboard Powerlink on 16 August 1998.

Seeboard Powerlink is responsible for the maintenance and renewal of these cables for the duration of the contract.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans have been agreed with the Seeboard Powerlink consortium for the retention of generating plant at *(a)* the Lots Road and *(b)* the Greenwich power stations. [100933]

Mr. Hill: Under the terms of the Power PFI contract, Seeboard Powerlink are working together with London Underground to close Lots Road Power station during 2001. Main power supplies for the Underground will then be obtained from the National Grid.

For the duration of the contract, Seeboard Powerlink will require Greenwich Power station to provide emergency power in the event of a failure of supplies from the National Grid. Seeboard Powerlink is responsible for maintenance and renewal during this period.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many London Underground sub-station staff were transferred to the Seeboard Powerlink consortium under the terms of the Power PFI contract. [100931]

Mr. Hill: Under the terms of the Power PFI contract, 315 London Underground employees transferred to Seeboard Powerlink, including 148 sub-station staff.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the changes made to Comprehensive Spending Review spending plans for his Department since July 1998. [100891]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The following table sets out the spending plans within my Department's Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) as published in July 1998 (Table 8.1 of Cm. 4011) compared to the position following the 1999–2000 Revised and Summer Supplementary Estimates. For subsequent changes I refer the hon. Member to the answer which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac) on 5 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 346–49W, and the Supply Estimates 1999–2000: Winter Supplementary Estimates published on the 18 November.

The changes between the CSR settlement and the present position for Housing and other and Regeneration, are the result principally of the establishment of the Regional Development Agencies (now included in the Regeneration line), which have taken over the administration of some programmes formerly included with Housing and other. The other changes are the cumulative result of a large number of: small technical (public expenditure classification) changes; transfers to and from other Departmental Expenditure Limits; and some minor transfers between programmes within my Department's DEL.

£ million

	CSR[1] 1999–2000	*Latest[2] 1999–2000*	*CSR[1] 2000–01*	*Latest[2] 2000–01*	*CSR[1] 2001–02*	*Latest[2] 2001–02*
Housing and other	3,829	3,665	4,581	4,422	5,195	5,032
Regeneration (including New Deal for Communities)	1,352	1,443	1,533	1,621	1,765	1,849
Transport	2,880	2,935	3,231	3,172	3,673	3,575
London Transport, Rail Franchise Payments and CTRL	1,670	1,624	1,238	1,255	1,367	1,431
Total DETR	9,729	9,666	10,582	10,470	12,000	11,888

[1] As published in Table 8.1 of Cm 4011 (Modern Public Services for Britain—Investing in reform).
[2] Post Summer Supplementary/Revised Estimates position.

Concessionary Bus Fares

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the national minimum concessionary bus fare for pensioners has been budgeted for introduction before 2001–02. [100890]

Mr. Hill: The Transport Bill published on 1 December contains our proposals for the introduction of the standard minimum for local authority concessionary travel schemes for pensioners. The standard minimum concession cannot be implemented until the necessary primary legislation has been enacted, so the earliest practical introduction date will be 2001–02.

Departmental Reports

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the titles of departmental reports being prepared for publication in the next 12 months, giving in each case the estimated date of publication. [100889]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions is preparing *DETR Departmental Annual Report 2000*, which will be published in spring 2000.

A41 (Aylesbury)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the completion of the A41 Aston Clinton bypass on traffic *(a)* volumes and *(b)* flows on the A41 through Aylesbury. [101117]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the acting Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mr. Richard Thorndike to Mr. David Lidington, dated 7 December 1999:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, Keith Hill, to reply to your recent parliamentary question about the impact of the A41 Aston Clinton Bypass on traffic on the A41 through Aylesbury. I am replying in the absence of the Chief Executive, Peter Nutt.

At present over 26,000 vehicles a day use the A41 through Aston Clinton. Our forecasts show that 70% of this traffic would divert onto the bypass. They also show that other local roads would not be adversely affected by the opening of the bypass nor would the A41 through Aylesbury.

Railway Finances

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on *(a)* how the debts of British Rail are to be managed and *(b)* the borrowing powers available to the Strategic Rail Authority. [100885]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is considering these matters with the Chairman of the Shadow Strategic Rail Authority and the Treasury.

Drivers (Mobile Phones)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has to prevent drivers of motor vehicles from using hand-held mobile phones whilst they are driving. [100901]

Mr. Hill: Drivers are charged with dangerous driving (Section 2 of the Road Traffic Act 1988) or driving without due care and attention (Section 3 of that Act) if using a mobile phone causes them to drive in such a manner; or with failing to exercise proper control of a vehicle (Section 104 of the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986.

Merseytravel Scheme

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the benefit of the Merseytravel concessionary fares scheme to the *(a)* elderly and *(b)* disabled. [101166]

Mr. Hill: I have not made any assessment of this scheme. It is for individual local authorities—in this case Merseyside Passenger Transport Authority—to decide whether to operate concessionary fare schemes and what level of benefit to provide.

Homelessness

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to commission research on the needs of older single homeless people accommodated and rehoused via local authority homeless services. [101186]

Mr. Mullin: Data are already collected on older households accepted as homeless by local authorities. Overall, the total number of such households has declined from 6,060 in 1993–94 to 3,700 in 1998–99. During this same period the proportion of these households, compared to other households accepted as homeless, has declined from five per cent. to four per cent.[1]

The Department has no plans for additional data collection or research in this area at present.

[1] DETR, Information Bulletin, September 1999, Statistics of Local Authority Activities Under the Homelessness Legislation: England Second Quarter of 1999.

Greater London Authority

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for how long it is planned that the future Mayor of London will occupy the offices currently under conversion for him. [101155]

Mr. Hill: The Greater London Authority will remain in Romney House until the new headquarters building at London Bridge is completed. Negotiations on the agreement to lease and occupancy date are well advanced and I expect to make an announcement very shortly.

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the budgeted cost is of converting offices for the future Mayor of London. [101154]

Mr. Hill: The temporary home of the new Greater London Authority in Romney House was selected from the Department's estate and it is anticipated that the cost of refurbishment will be around £2 million. The offices will be re-used by the Department once the GLA moves to its new headquarters building in London Bridge.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what response there has been to the consultation on the paper, "The Shape of Things to Come", concerning the organisational structure for the Greater London Authority. [102116]

Mr. Hill: The GLA Transition Team, under Dr. Robert Chilton, has advised me on the responses to the consultation exercise, and I have agreed some minor changes to the organisational structure originally proposed. A response document, entitled "Shaping up for the Mayor and Assembly" has today been published. A copy will be placed in the House Library.

Waste Recycling

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those local authorities which have met his target for recycling domestic waste. [101446]

Mr. Meacher: There is no recycling target which each individual local authority is expected to meet. There is a national goal to recycle or compost 25 per cent. of household waste as soon as possible, hopefully by 2005. By 2010 we hope to see 30 per cent. of household waste being recycled or composted, and in the longer term we hope to see a third of all households being dealt with in this way.

Under our Best Value Initiative performance indicators are being developed for local authority waste services. From these, authorities will be expected to derive targets for their own performance on waste, having regard to any national goals we set in the forthcoming National Waste Strategy. I emphasise, though, that local targets should take account of local assessments of the Best Practicable Environmental Option, and will not therefore necessarily be at the same level as our national goals. I fully expect some authorities to put forward targets that exceed those that we propose, and others to put forward lower targets.

From data supplied for the 1997–98 Municipal Waste Survey, it is clear that many authorities are doing excellent work on recycling and composting. From that data, the following authorities have recycling rates of 25 per cent. or over, and some are exceeding 30 per cent.:

Adur District Council
Chichester District Council
Chiltern District Council
Christchurch Borough Council
East Dorset District Council
Eastleigh Borough Council
Gosport Borough Council
Havant Borough Council
New Forest District Council
North Dorset District Council
Purbeck District Council
Reigate and Banstead Borough Council
South Bucks District Council
Tandridge District Council
Weymouth and Portland Borough Council

Note:

Recycling rates are calculated as the quantity of household waste collected for recycling, expressed as a percentage of total household waste. These calculations exclude recycling of building rubble, and make no allowance for home composting.

In non-unitary areas, the figures cover amounts collected within the area by both the Waste Collection Authority and the Waste Disposal Authority. In most cases, figures for total household waste (apart from amounts collected for recycling) are taken from returns from Waste Disposal Authorities.

I also know that a number of authorities who do not appear on this list have recently put in new schemes which are helping those authorities to be well on the way to achieving recycling rates over 40 per cent.

Waste Incineration

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's liability for any health problems caused by the incineration of waste. [100942]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The setting and enforcing of high environmental protection standards for waste incineration is a priority for the Government. Incinerators in England (and Wales) are regulated by the Environment Agency or local authorities under the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Whether a particular person or organisation would be liable for any damage caused by incineration would be for the Courts to decide in the circumstances of the particular case.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the incineration of waste on *(a)* the Government's national air quality strategy and *(b)* local authority air quality strategies; and if he will make a statement. [100944]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The recent review of the UK National Air Quality Strategy considered all stationary and mobile sources of air pollution, including waste incineration, in forecasting the future air pollution climate. A revised version of the Strategy is to be published shortly. Incineration plant are already tightly controlled under the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 through which EU waste incineration legislation is also implemented.

No national assessment has been made of the impact of incineration on local air quality strategies. In carrying out their local air quality management duties, however, local authorities will need to take account of the impact on air quality of any incineration processes in their areas. In drawing up any action plan or strategy to tackle local air pollution, authorities will wish to ensure that any additional reduction contributed by different sources (including any incineration processes) is balanced, proportionate and cost effective in relation to achieving the plan's objectives.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research the Government have commissioned into the possible risk to human health from the incineration of waste, indicating the publication date of each research document. [100943]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The following recent Government sponsored research has addressed possible risks to human health specifically in relation to waste incineration:

Risk assessment of dioxin releases from municipal waste incineration processes HMIP/CPR2/41/1/181 Published by HMIP, 1996.

Cancer incidence near municipal solid waste incinerators in Great Britain, by SAHSU, Elliott P, et al. Published in the British Journal of Cancer 1996 volume 73, pp 702–710. (A follow up study is to be published in the same journal early next year).

A study of dioxins and furans in soil around four municipal waste incinerators in Hampshire, prepared by AEA Technology for the Environment Agency, 1996.

Risks from BSE via environmental pathways, prepared by DNV for the Environment Agency, 1997.

Health Effects of Waste Combustion Products, prepared by the Medical Research Council/Institute for Environment and Health for DTI, 1997.

The Department of Health's Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants has also published a number of reports which are relevant to possible health effects of waste incineration. These are:

Non-biological particles and health, Published 1995

Asthma and outdoor pollution, Published 1995

Quantification of the effects of air pollution on health in the UK, Published 1998.

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution's Seventeenth Report on Incineration of Waste (Cm 2181, 1993) also considered health effects of waste incineration. The Department of Health/Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Air Pollution Research Initiative is currently examining the effects on health of some products of combustion, including particles. A report for the Environment Agency on clinicai waste disposal risk assessment is to be published shortly.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he has taken to ensure that the North West Regional Development Agency consults local authorities in non-assisted areas within the region. [101344]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* RDAs are expected to consult regularly with all local authorities in their regions and we will expect them to continue to consult on their activities as these progress.

Most recently, the North West Development Agency consulted with local authorities and other regional partners in drawing up its regional strategy.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given to regional development agencies on discharging of their statutory obligation to promote sustainable development in their regional economic strategies. [101697]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Guidance on the formulation of the strategies was issued to the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) on 31 March 1999. This outlined how the RDAs should seek to meet their statutory duty under Section 4 of the RDAs Act 1998, to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK, where it is relevant to its area to do so.

The guidance specifies that an appraisal of the contribution the strategy will make to sustainable development should be produced.

In addition to the guidance on RDAs' strategies, the Government have issued supplementary guidance to advise the RDAs more fully on sustainable development issues.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how the regional economic strategies of the regional development agencies will be monitored to ensure that the regional development agencies conform with statutory guidance *(a)* to take account of the needs of rural areas and *(b)* to promote sustainable development. [101698]

Ms Beverley Hughes: As set out in the guidance to RDAs on the formulation of their strategies, the Government Offices for the Region will provide the focus for an on-going dialogue with Government as each strategy develops and is reviewed. They will also provide a means of ensuring that each strategy enhances and supports national policies and programmes.

Transport Safety

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will complete his review of transport safety and accident investigation. [101846]

Mr. Hill: The review of transport safety arrangements, including accident investigation, is expected to be completed in the New Year.

Radioactive Waste

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on recent EU legislation allowing member states to recycle low-level radioactive waste into consumer products. [101694]

Mr. Mullin: The EURATOM Basic Safety Standards Directive Euratom 96–29 imposes a high degree of radiological protection revising earlier Directives setting basic safety standards for the protection of workers and members of the public against the dangers of ionising radiation. Article five of the Directive makes the disposal, recycling or re-use of radioactive substances subject to authorisation by the regulators.

With most materials containing some radioactivity it is important to set thresholds in regulations below which materials will be treated as outside the framework of control. The Directive therefore permits member states to set levels of radioactivity below which materials can be disposed of, recycled and re-used without needing prior authorisation. This concept is known as clearance, with clearance levels setting a threshold at or below which the levels of radioactivity are small and pose negligible radiological risk, irrespective of the volume and fate of that material. The Government have recently issued a consultation document on implementation of the Directive including the issue of clearance levels. Responses to this are still being considered and Government proposals will be made in due course.

In the UK, the sale or disposal of radioactively contaminated material is closely regulated by the Environment Agency (in England and Wales), the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (in Scotland), and Department of Environment (NI) in Northern Ireland under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993 to ensure that the levels of radioactivity involved pose insignificant risk to human health or the environment.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received concerning the recycling of low-level radioactive waste into consumer products. [101695]

Mr. Mullin: In response to a leaflet run by the Low Level Radiation Campaign (LLRC) about concerns of contaminated materials being reused and recycled into consumer goods, the Department has received 28 letters, 14 of which have been replied to by Ministers and 14 by officials. In addition, in response to a recent consultation exercise on implementation of the revised Basic Safety Standards Directive Euratom 96/29, further representations in support of the LLRC were received.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has met with representatives of the LLRC when the matter of recycling low-level radioactive waste in consumer products was discussed.

Rolling Stock

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to strengthen the regulation of rail companies to ensure that adequate rolling stock is provided on peak-time rail services in order to avert over-crowding. [101346]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* Train Operating Companies (TOCs) have a general obligation to avoid excessive overcrowding on all services. London commuter TOCs and TOCs providing some commuter services into Edinburgh are subject to annual counts of Passengers in Excess of Capacity (PIXC) and must not exceed 4.5 per cent. above capacity in either the morning or evening peak and 3 per cent. in the combined morning and evening peaks. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister issued the Franchising Director with new

Instructions and Guidance on 29 September 1999 in which he asked him to deliver improvements in services through re-negotiation of the terms of franchise agreements.

Blackpool to Manchester Line

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his policy is on the electrification of the Blackpool to Manchester line. [101345]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* Railtrack have told me that they believe there is no business case for electrification of the Blackpool to Manchester line unless external funding is available. They also say that no interest has been shown from any train operating company.

Brownfield Development

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the brownfield development sites in *(a)* Colchester borough and *(b)* Tendring district. [101631]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The information is not available centrally. Provisional estimates, from the National Land Use Database, of the total amount of previously developed land that may be available for redevelopment by Government Office Region were published last May in the Department's Information Bulletin 500.

Landfill Gases

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what Government-sponsored research there has been into the health effects of burning landfill gases in the last 10 years. [101434]

Mr. Hill: Last year the Department commissioned the Small Area Health Statistics Unit at Imperial College to carry out a national study of adverse health effects around landfill sites. The results of this study are anticipated in approximately 18 months time. In September this year my right hon. Friend, the Minister for the Environment, launched a Government-funded research programme which will provide further information about potential harmful effects of substances which may be released from landfill sites.

Water Resources

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which body is responsible for ensuring that there are sufficient water resources for future large scale development under regional planning guidance. [101433]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The consultation draft of Planning Policy Guidance Note 11—Regional Planning, published earlier this year, makes clear (para. 2.31) that the Regional Planning Bodies, in framing policies in draft Regional Planning Guidance, should consider with the Environment Agency and the water industry the availability of water resources. Regional Planning Guidance should help foster co-operation between local planning authorities, water companies and the Environment Agency to ensure that water supply sources are protected and that rates of development do not exceed the capacities of existing or planned water supply systems to meet projected demand.

Public Transport Costs

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the costs of public transport in *(a)* London and *(b)* other European capitals. [101510]

Mr. Hill: The cost to the Government of supporting London Transport is recorded in the Annual Report of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The Annual Report also gives the cost of supporting train services, though it is not possible to identify separately the cost of supporting train services in London.

Costs incurred by London Transport in providing bus and underground services are published in their annual report and accounts.

The Government do not maintain statistics on the finances of public transport systems in other European capitals.

EU Structural Funds (Merseyside)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the role of the public sector in providing match funding for the Objective 1 Merseyside Programme for *(a)* the current programme and *(b)* the programme for 2000–2006. [101840]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Merseyside has run a highly successful Objective 1 programme in the current round, and the Government welcome the new Objective 1 programme which will bring in more than £850 million in European funding. This will bring new opportunities to stimulate economic growth and encourage increased investment and jobs.

The position on match funding for the Objective 1 Merseyside Programme has not changed—it will continue to be the responsibility of grant applicants. This principle is an important element in ensuring local ownership and commitment, and helping integration of regional priorities and strategies. In this way, European funding is used alongside money already provided at the national and local level to help revitalise the area and achieve a better quality of life for those who live there.

The Government have provided, and will continue to provide, significant financial support for Merseyside through a wide variety of programmes. These include the Single Regeneration Budget and New Deal for Communities, as well as mainstream programmes such as the Revenue Support Grant for local authorities. Local partnerships can prioritise the use of these resources to fund projects jointly with the Structural Funds, thereby boosting their impact.

Regional partners can also seek to match their European funds with contributions from the voluntary and private sectors, as well as through loans from organisations such as the European Investment Bank.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Parental Rights

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will equalise the rights and the responsibilities of unmarried parents where both parents' names are given on the child's birth certificate and where there is financial commitment by both parents to the maintenance and welfare of the child. [101338]

Jane Kennedy: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) on 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 398W.

Family Law

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor will publish the report on the consultation on the document, Contact between Children and Violent Parents. [101507]

Jane Kennedy: The consultation paper on the question of parental contact in cases where there is domestic violence was issued by the Children Act Sub-Committee of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Board on Family Law in June 1999. The Advisory Board is an independent, advisory non-departmental public body. The consultation period was extended to 1 December and the responses are currently being collated for consideration by the Sub-Committee. The Advisory Board will consider in the new year the question of how and when the results of the consultation should be made public.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department which organisations responded to the consultation document, Contact between Children and Violent Parents, produced by her Department's Advisory Board on Family Law; and what issues they raised. [101506]

Jane Kennedy: The consultation paper on the question of parental contact in cases where there is domestic violence was issued by the Children Act Sub-Committee of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Board on Family Law in June 1999. The Advisory Board is an independent, advisory non-departmental public body. Over 200 responses have been received and these are currently being collated and summarised for consideration by the Sub-Committee in the New Year. The Sub-Committee will consider the issues raised, the advice to be given and the question of how the results of the consultation should be made public.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much his Department has spent on ministerial transport in 1995–96 and 1996–97. [98715]

Mr. Bayley: The information my hon. Friend has requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, information dating from the establishment of the Government Car and Despatch Agency in April 1997 is available, and I refer her to the answer provided by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 255–56W.

Special Payments

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what changes he has made to the indicators of delay which have to be satisfied before a special payment can be considered since 1 May 1997; [101095]

(2) if he will publish in respect of each benefit payable the indicators of delay which must be satisfied before a special payment can be considered due to late payment. [101096]

Mr. Bayley: No changes have been made to the indicators of delay which have to be satisfied before a special payment can be considered since 1 May 1997.

The indicators of delay which must be satisfied in respect of each benefit before a special payment can be considered due to late payment are published in "Financial Redress for Maladministration". This document is available in every Local Office for the general public to read upon request. It is also available in the Library, at main public libraries and as a priced document from The Stationery Office bookshops.

Work-focused Gateway

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to extend *(a)* private and voluntary sector involvement in and *(b)* call centre facilities to all the single work-focused gateway pilot projects. [100873]

Angela Eagle: There are no plans to extend the private sector involvement or call centre facilities to the four 'basic model' pilots. The three pilot variants were chosen to test different methods of delivering the ONE service. We are monitoring the pilots carefully and have planned a full evaluation of the ONE service using qualitative as well as quantitative research.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what recent assessment he has made of the performance of the single work-focused gateway pilot project in Clyde Coast and Renfrew; [100874]

(2) how many people *(a)* have attended an interview with a personal adviser and *(b)* been successfully placed in the employment option as part of the single work-focused gateway pilot project in Clyde Coast and Renfrew. [100875]

Angela Eagle: The early signs are encouraging; clients are pleased with the ONE service and the active support that it offers. It is helping people to make links with the labour market who might hitherto never have considered that work was even a possibility. It is not, however, meaningful to assess the pilots further at such an early stage or to draw any conclusions from the figures while the pilots are settling down. We are investing considerable resources in a thorough evaluation of the ONE service and when robust and reliable data are available we will make them public.

Benefit Administrator

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish in respect of all benefits payable the length of time which his Department expects to clear claims for that particular benefit. [101094]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mark Fisher to Mr. Christopher Chope, dated 6 December 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked Peter Mathison to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about publication of benefit clearance times. As he is unavailable I am replying.

The Benefits Agency Customer Charter, which was published on 29 November, sets out national standards for a range of activities that customers can expect the Agency's offices to provide. This includes the length of time the Agency expects to take to clear benefit claims made by the Agency's main client groups, i. e. those of working age, pension age, the disabled and children. It also takes account of the need to balance accuracy and speed.

The information is set out in the attached table.

I hope this is helpful.

Charter standards: Time taken for decisions on claims and change of circumstances

Benefit	*Claims (working days)*
Income Support	13
Jobseeker's Allowance	21
Incapacity Benefit	30
Disability Living Allowance	53
Retirement Pension	60
Child Benefit	30

Income Support

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people living in the London Borough of Wandsworth are in receipt of income support. [101045]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 6 December 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the number of people living on the London Borough of Wandsworth on Income Support (IS).

The information is not available in the format requested as the Benefits Agency does not collate information by local authority boundary. However, a figure can be obtained by identifying the postcode of customers living in the area.

The number of IS claims from within the London Borough of Wandsworth is approximately 18,500. This represents the number of IS claims, not the total number of beneficiaries of those claims. It is rounded to the nearest hundred cases, and is subject to a degree of sampling error. The sample size was 5% of the IS live load, taken from the IS Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, August 1999.

I hope this is helpful.

Parental Benefits

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many non-resident parents are exempt from payment of child support maintenance under regulation 26 of the Child Support (Maintenance Assessment and Special Cases) Regulations 1992 on the grounds that they have the family premium included in the calculation or estimation of their protected income level. [101202]

Angela Eagle: There are 44,440 non-resident parents on benefit who are exempt from payment of child support maintenance under regulation 26 because they are receiving the family premium.

Note:

29,240 on Income Support and 15,200 on income-based Jobseeker's Allowance.

Source:

August 1999 scan of Income Support and JSA Computer Systems.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of parents with care who will have the level of their maintenance assessments reduced under the proposed changes to the child support scheme and are *(a)* not in receipt of tax credits, Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance and *(b)* in receipt of tax credits but have a child support assessment under the current rules of less than £15 per week. [101201]

Angela Eagle: We estimate that, of the parents with care whose current maintenance assessment is higher than the liability worked out using the new rates, there are around 140,000 who are not in receipt of tax credits, Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance. On the same basis, there are around 10,000 parents with care who we anticipate will have a lower maintenance calculation under the new scheme who are receiving tax credit and have a child support assessment of less than £15 a week.

Notes:

1. New scheme maintenance modelled on August 1998 5 per cent. scan of the Child Support computer system.

2. Caseloads calibrated to forecast "A" day levels and are rounded to the nearest 10,000.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of disregarding the full amount of child support maintenance payment received in calculating entitlement to housing benefit and council tax benefit. [101203]

Angela Eagle: We estimate that the cost of fully disregarding maintenance payments in Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit would be about £30 million a year. This includes an estimate for the cost for cases who would become newly entitled as a result of the full disregard.

Notes:

1. Cost for existing claims based on data taken from May 1998 HBMIS dataset, a 1 per cent. survey of HB claims.

2. Cost for cases who become newly entitled is calculated from data taken from 1996–97 Family Resources Survey uprated to 2000–01 prices, benefits and earnings levels.

3. Costs and Caseloads are calibrated to forecast caseloads for 2000–01. The cost has been rounded to the nearest £10 million.

4. This cost will include a small element of spousal maintenance.

Council Tax Benefit

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to make the payment of council tax benefit and housing benefit faster and more efficient. [101367]

Angela Eagle: We are committed to driving forward improvements in the benefit services authorities provide so that they are faster, more accurate and more secure whilst also achieving value for money and taking account of the views and needs of local people. A comprehensive range of best value performance indicators for the delivery of Housing and Council Tax Benefit was included in the recent joint DETR and Audit Commission consultation exercise ("Performance Indicators for 2000/2001"). Indicators will be finalised by the end of 1999 and will cover the key aspects of local authorities' performance in delivering Housing and Council Tax Benefit.

A number of initiatives are also currently being developed and implemented in partnership with local authorities to improve the efficiency and speed of Housing and Council Tax Benefit delivery.

Remote Access Terminals are now installed in 346 local authorities. These terminals provide the authorities with direct access to relevant benefit information held by the Benefits Agency and contribute towards reducing the time it takes to process Housing and Council Tax Benefit claims.

The Department has now completed piloting the Electronic Transfer of Data in 20 sites. This initiative, if implemented nationally, will remove the need for approximately 20 million paper transactions each year between Benefit Agency and local authority offices, while reducing transfer time to two working days.

Child Benefit

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will instruct the child benefit centre to write to all recipients of child benefit reminding them of their right to claim benefit in cash from their local post office; and if he will make a statement of his policy on encouraging benefit payments to be made by direct transfer to a local bank account. [101327]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 1 December 1999, *Official Report,* column 238W.

We do not intend to take active steps to move customers on to automated credit transfer (ACT) before 2003. Until then, the Department will continue, in the normal way, to provide customers with the information they need on benefit payment options, and customers will continue, as now, to be able to choose between payment by order book at post offices and payment by ACT.

Pensioners

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate *(a)* the numbers of those resident in North-West Norfolk who will or would benefit from and *(b)* the full-year cost to his Department of delivery to those people of (i) the increase in the basic state pension (1) as announced and (2) if it had been raised this year in line with the rise in earnings, (ii) the minimum income guarantee for pensioners, (iii) the £100 payment for pensioner households and (iv) the free television licence for those over 75 years. [101380]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available at Parliamentary constituency level.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is responsible for introducing the free television licence for the over 75s.

Benefits (Method of Payment)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) in preparing for the transfer of benefits business from the Post Office to banks, what agreement has been reached with the banks to manage their branch operations consistent with the special needs of low income customers; [101607]

(2) when benefits business is transferred from the Post Office to banks who will carry the liability for bank account charges, with particular reference to charges for ATM withdrawals. [101608]

Mr. Rooker: We have decided to move to automated credit transfer (ACT) from 2003 as a modern, more secure and efficient method of paying benefits. The Department will be arranging discussions with the banking industry on issues surrounding benefit recipients, charges and other matters in due course.

Savings Limits

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the value of suspended or party-paid endowment plans is taken into account in the calculation of savings for the savings limits in means-tested benefits. [101401]

Mr. Bayley: The surrender value of any policy of life insurance, including these types of policy, is disregarded in the assessment of entitlement to means-tested benefits (Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit).

PRIME Contract

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place a copy of the PRIME contract in the Library. [101841]

Angela Eagle: The PRIME contract contains not only technical data but also information of a commercially confidential nature. It is therefore subject to a confidentiality agreement between the Department and the contractor, Trillium. The Department will, however, take the matter forward with Trillium, with a view to obtaining an acceptable solution to the publication or disclosure of the document.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if the PRIME contract with Trillium allows his Department to sub-let immediately surplus parts of the estate above the 2 per cent. per year which his Department is allowed to vacate without charge; [101842]

(2) if the PRIME contract with Trillium allows his Department to sub-let surplus parts of the estate above the 35 per cent. which his Department may vacate without charge. [101843]

Angela Eagle: Now that the Department no longer owns any freehold accommodation, and has transferred the risk of all former leasehold properties to Trillium, we can no longer sub-let to the open market. We believe, however, that we have negotiated sufficient flexibility with this contract to meet our changing business needs.

On 1 April 1998, at the outset of the PRIME contract just under 30 per cent. of the total estate (some 1,644,089 square metres including surplus space) was designated "flexible". This is accommodation which we are entitled to vacate over the course of the contract without charge.

Up to 2 per cent. of this flexible space can be released each year with any unused allowance being carried forward until required. In addition to this, a further 10 per cent. of the total estate can be vacated subject to a charge, to cover Trillium's "unavoidable costs".

Having already given back to Trillium some 10 per cent. of the estate that was surplus to requirements on day one of the contract, we effectively have a package in place that will allow us to vacate half of the entire estate.

In the first year of the contract, however, only 1 per cent. of our flexible accommodation was returned to Trillium, so that we now have some 3 per cent. available for release this year. The current indication is that we will return around 0.5 per cent. before April, so, with the roll over allowance, we could feasibly give back 4.5 per cent. of space to Trillium in the third year of the contract.

The Department is, therefore, well within the flexibility allowance. If a situation arose where we were ever in a situation that we had used up all flexibility in the contract, we could still attempt to return space to Trillium by negotiation or offer it to other Government Departments.

Money Purchase Plans

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the total value of money purchase plans presented for annualisation or income drawdown plans was in *(a)* 1990, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 1998; and what value is estimated for (i) 1999, (ii) 2000 and (iii) 2004. [101844]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

The total value of lump sums used to purchase pension annuities or income drawdown plans is given in the following table. The information does not distinguish between money purchase and other pension plans which are presented for annuitisation or income drawdown. The information on annuity purchase is only available from 1991 and the income drawdown information from 1996. No projections for future years are available.

£ million

	New single premiums for pension annuities	*New single premiums for income drawdown plans*
1991	2,450	—
1997	4,300	1,546
1998	5,620	1,749

Source:
Association of British Insurers (ABI)

SCOTLAND

Correspondence

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he plans to reply to the Question of 17 November (ref 98578) from the hon. Member for Hertsmere. [101696]

Dr. Reid: I replied to the hon. Member yesterday, 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 365–66W.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Engagements

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 18 November. [99851]

Mr. Mandelson: On the morning of 18 November I met with my Parliamentary Private Secretary; attended a Labour Party staff meeting; and attended Cabinet.

In the afternoon I recorded a televised message for Voluntary Services Overseas, in connection with the launch of VSO's business partnerships; and I met the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Later, in Northern Ireland I attended a National Arts Collections Fund evening.

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much his Department has spent on ministerial transport in each of the last two years. [98703]

Mr. Ingram: Ministers are required—under the terms of the Ministerial Code, and Travel by Ministers—to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. For information on spend on the Government Car Service, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to her by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 255W. Additional amounts of £524,593[1] and £557,700 were spent in 1997–98 and 1998–99 respectively for Northern Ireland Ministers.

[1] Excludes information on car hire charges which could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Sectarian Attacks

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the *(a)* dates, *(b)* times and *(c)* location of each reported sectarian attack in Northern Ireland since 1 June, of which the RUC is aware, indicating those incidents following which persons have been charged. [100176]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 1 December 1999]:* It is not possible to provide the information requested as crimes are not recorded as sectarian. However I am advised that between 1 June and 23 November 1999 there have been 11 attacks on church property, 17 attacks on school property, 17 attacks on Orange halls and one attack on GAA property.

HEALTH

Waiting Lists

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made by Northamptonshire Health Authority in meeting the Government's targets to reduce waiting lists within the NHS. [100783]

Mr. Denham: Northamptonshire Health Authority is making excellent progress on reducing waiting lists in line with our targets set for the National Health Service.

Inpatients

At the end of October 1999, Northamptonshire Health Authority had a total inpatient waiting list of 13,223. Inpatient waiting figures in March 1997 for Northampton HA was 13,835, however these figures were collected on a district resident basis, whereas current figures are based on primary care group area.

Employment Policies

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce more flexible and family friendly employment policies in the National Health Service. [100618]

Mr. Denham: The human resources framework Working Together sets out our determination to improve the quality of working lives for staff in the National Health Service. This year a resource pack called Working Lives was issued to all NHS employers to share good practice. A second resource pack is in preparation which will include lessons learnt from the retail sector on work schedules and rostering systems.

In September this year Ministers launched a £1 million campaign called "Improving Working Lives in the NHS" as part of our wider agenda on supporting the family. Each region has appointed a high profile champion to lead a multi disciplinary task force to introduce more flexible and family friendly policies in the NHS. The "Improving Working Lives Champion" for Bolton North East is Kath Holbourn, Director of Nursing, Leighton Hospital, Middlewich Road, Crewe and can be contacted on 01270 612 351.

A kite marking system will be developed to ensure that local organisations that perform well can be recognised. As a first step a draft set of principles outlining the values and characteristics of NHS organisations committed to these policies was published in September for consultation. Copies of the consultation booklet "Improving Working Lives in the NHS" have been placed in the Library.

Nurses

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to recruit nurses to, and retain nurses in, the National Health Service. [100607]

Mr. Denham: The comprehensive spending review allows the employment of up to 15,000 more nurses, midwives and health visitors over the next three years and 6,000 more nurse training places. This year nurses received the biggest real terms pay rise for nurses for 10 years, and for the first time in five years the award was paid nationally, in full and with no staging from 1 April 1999.

This year's £5 million nursing recruitment campaign attracted a very encouraging response with over 53,000 inquiries. Since the campaign began, over 2,000 nurses have already returned to employment in the National Health Service in England, with a further 2,000 in the pipeline. 57 per cent. of those who have returned so far have taken up part-time posts, which demonstrates how the NHS is providing more flexible family friendly employment opportunities for nurses who wish to return. The Department is running a campaign called "Improving Working Lives in the NHS" as part of the overarching human resource framework "Working Together". We have also taken steps to address racism and violence and to promote equal opportunities.

The schools competition run this year also attracted a very encouraging response. The number of applications for nursing and midwifery courses for this academic year rose by 92 per cent. on the total number of applications last year.

Hospices

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what support has been provided by his Department to individual hospices in each of the last three years; [100137]

(2) what role he proposes for hospices in health improvement programmes. [100139]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* The development of health improvement programmes is led by the health authority in partnership with the whole range of local interests, including those who provide local services and those who use local services either as patients or carers, the organisations that represent them, such as community health councils, voluntary sector organisations, support and community groups. This will, where appropriate, include the involvement of hospices and will provide a further opportunity for them to contribute to the development at a local level of strategies for palliative care provision. The need for high quality palliative care should be considered locally as part of the health improvement programme process.

Approximately a third of hospice running costs are met through the National Health Service.

Some £20 million will also be made available to palliative care from the National Lottery new opportunities fund for the cancer detection, treatment and care initiative. The initiative will be launched early in the new year.

Strokes

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which authorities retain specialist stroke units. [100867]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the format requested, as authorities use different definitions of specialist stroke units.

However the report on the National Sentinel Audit of stroke 1998 showed that in relation to organised stroke care 50 per cent. of National Health Service trusts nationally had a specialist stroke team, with 64 per cent. having a consultant with responsibility for stroke.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the average cost of caring for a stroke victim in each health authority for the latest available year. [100865]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the format requested.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what inquiries his Department has undertaken since 1992 to determine the impact of stroke on the population. [100870]

Mr. Denham: The Department conducts annual monitoring of stroke mortality rates collected by the Office for National Statistics.

Every five years disability is monitored as part of the Health Survey of England.

Dental Anaesthesia (Fees)

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will remove dental anaesthesia from the general dental practitioners' scale of fees. [101191]

Mr. Hutton: A review of general anaesthesia and sedation for dental treatment is currently taking place. Decisions about future funding for provision of this service will be made once Ministers have considered the review's findings.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Operation CARE

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what claims for compensation his Department has received from individuals in relation to Operation CARE. [100236]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Victims of sexual and physical abuse as children can claim compensation under the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme, which is administered by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority.

The Authority advise that they cannot isolate cases that are attributable to Operation CARE.

Pre-inquest Disclosure

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the compliance by the Metropolitan Police with his Department's circular on pre-inquest disclosure to families of persons who have died in police custody in *(a)* the Roger Sylvester case and *(b)* other cases; and if he will make a statement. [100846]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No general assessment of compliance has yet been made. The circular was issued on 28 April 1999 and it remains our intention to review the implementation of the guidance after it has been in operation for a year.

My understanding from the information available to me is that the Metropolitan Police are complying with the circular. The Crown Prosecution Service is considering whether criminal proceedings relating to the death of Mr. Sylvester are appropriate. The circular states that disclosure should not take place until either the Crown Prosecution Service has advised against a prosecution of proceedings are complete.

Driving Offences

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of convictions in 1998 of motorists charged with driving while under the influence of *(a)* alcohol and *(b)* drugs; and if he will make a statement. [101097]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is not possible in the statistics held centrally to distinguish between convictions for driving while under the influence of drugs and convictions for drinking under the influence of alcohol because the charge does not distinguish which of the two is involved.

Figures of convictions for motoring offences in 1998 have not yet been published, but provisional figures show that some 93,000 convictions for driving after consuming alcohol or taking drugs were recorded in England and Wales, some 7 per cent. lower than the previous year.

Figures from the Forensic Science Service, however, show that 1,779 blood samples were analysed by them on behalf of the police service in England and Wales during 1998–99, following charges under Section 4 of the Road Traffic Act 1988, approximately 90 per cent. of which were found to contain one or more drugs (although it is known that some police forces may have submitted blood samples for analysis elsewhere).

Merseyside Police

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers served in Merseyside Police for each year since 1994 to date; and what is the current number of serving officers. [101038]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on police numbers is collected twice a year (March and September). The figures for September 1999 are not yet available. The information requested for each year since 1994 is set out in the table.

Year (as at 31 March)	*Police officer numbers*
1994	4,693
1995	4,659
1996	4,411
1997	4,230
1998	4,216
1999	4,211

Cyclists (Fines)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many on-the-spot fines for cycling on the pavement have been issued by each police force since the scheme was introduced. [100902]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is not yet available.

Each police force has been asked to monitor the new fixed penalty provisions which came into force on 1 August 1999, but the figures are not likely to be available until early in the new year.

Police Efficiency

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what quantitative assessment he has made of the levels of efficiency of individual police forces, and of the differential impact of his proposed 2 per cent. efficiency savings on their operational capacity; and if he will make a statement. [101114]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office uses a number of different measures to assess police performance. There is no agreed formula for measuring police efficiency, although work on measuring comparative efficiency is being carried out locally to meet the requirements of Best Value. In addition, the Public Service Productivity Panel is assessing tools for measuring efficiency to assist Police Authorities in meeting their Best Value duties.

The efficiency targets set by the Government require each force to plan efficiency gains to equal to at least 2 per cent. of non-revenue expenditure for reinvestment in front line policing. Each force will retain any cash savings for use in improving their service to the public. The overall impact will be to make efficiency gains worth £440 million available for police operations between 1999 and 2002. The differential impact for each force will depend on the strength of the efficiency plan.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the impact on numbers of *(a)* total employees, *(b)* uniformed officers and *(c)* civilian staff of his planned 2 per cent. efficiency reduction for 2000–01 in respect of the (i) Greater Manchester, (ii) Cheshire, (iii) Merseyside and (iv) Lancashire police; and if he will make a statement. [101116]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This Government's Comprehensive Spending Review has set the police a 2 per cent. year on year efficiency target from April 1999. This is not a reduction in police funding—the resources released by efficiency gains will be reinvested in frontline policing.

As in 1999–2000, each police authority has been asked to produce an efficiency plan for the year 2000–01 detailing how this 2 per cent. efficiency target can be reached, and how cashable savings will be reinvested to provide a better public service.

The impact of efficiency plans on numbers of employees, whether police officers or civilians, is a matter for police authorities and chief officers to determine. We expect efficiency plans to be submitted to the Home Office by April 2000, and until they have been finalised I can make no assessment.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take into account the efficiency levels of police forces when assessing bids from them for the additional special funding for front-line officers; and if he will make a statement. [101115]

Mr. Charles Clarke: One of the "gateway" criteria against which bids will be assessed is that forces are on target to meet the 2 per cent. efficiency gains for 1999–2000 as required by the Government Comprehensive Spending Review.

Drugs

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons aged *(a)* 10, *(b)* 11, *(c)* 12, *(d)* 13, *(e)* 14, *(f)* 15, *(g)* 16, *(h)* 17 and *(i)* 18 years have been (i) cautioned and (ii) convicted for (1) possession of and (2) supply of (y) Class A and (z) Class B illegal drugs in each of the last 10 years. [101369]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Domestic Disputes (Bolton)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many custodial sentences were implemented by courts in Bolton for crimes relating to domestic disputes in each of the last 10 years. [101316]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is not possible to identify cases relating to domestic disputes from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database since it does not hold information on the circumstances behind individual offences.

Handguns

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many *(a)* illegal and *(b)* legally-held handguns have been handed in since the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 came into force; [101156]

(2) what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the ban on privately-held handguns in reducing the level of gun-related crime in the United Kingdom; [101165]

(3) how much has been paid in compensation to gun-owners for the surrender of handguns to the police since the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 came into force. [101199]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Just over 162,000 handguns were surrendered to the police under the terms of the Firearms (Amendment) Acts 1997. Records are not held centrally of those illegally or legally held firearms, including any handguns, which might have been handed in to the police for other reasons.

The ban on handguns was a direct response to the tragic shootings at Dunblane Primary School in March 1996, which were carried out with legally held handguns. It did not purport to solve the more general problem of armed crime, the vast majority of which is carried out using illegally held firearms. Nevertheless, the ban has removed one potential source of handguns for criminal use: in 1997, 305 handguns were stolen or otherwise misappropriated, mostly from private homes.

As at 30 November, a total of just over £89 million had been paid in compensation to those individuals who surrendered firearms and ancillary equipment under the terms of the 1997 Acts. The final figure is currently forecast to be approximately £90.2 million.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action is being taken to *(a)* detect and *(b)* confiscate illegally held handguns. [101157]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The decision of smuggled handguns is the responsibility of Her Majesty's Customs, and the recovery of those in criminal use is the individual responsibility of every Constabulary. Intelligence led

operations are used by the police to recover firearms from criminals, and Firearms Inquiry Units operated by the police concentrate on the licensing and administration of legitimate firearms to prevent legally held firearms being diverted into the criminal market. Additionally, the National Crime Squad and metropolitan forces run proactive operations against criminal sources that supply illegal handguns. The Association of Chief Police Officers two sub-committees, Criminal Use of Firearms and the Administration of Firearms and Explosives Licensing are also revising strategies to enhance the detection of illegally held firearms in criminal use.

In addition to these measures, the Government are pursuing a number of initiatives aimed at supporting police and Customs target and detect illegal activity as and when it occurs. These include:

The creation of a strategic threat assessment of the firearm situation in England and Wales by the National Criminal Intelligence Service;

a request by the Home Office for the Firearms Consultative Committee to look into the criminal misuse of firearms; and

the negotiation by the Home Office, internationally, a draft United Nations Protocol against the illicit manufacture of and trafficking in firearms and, within the European Union, action to review the European Union Firearms Directive with the emphasis on preventing illicit trafficking.

Once detected, all illegally held handguns are confiscated by police and Customs and, to ensure they never re-enter the market, the weapons are smelted. In 1998, Customs detected less than 200 firearms being smuggled into the United Kingdom, and collectively the police submitted to the Forensic Science Service fewer than 1,000 illegally held firearms recovered used in crime.

Life Sentences (Murder)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department since 1983 *(a)* how many people have been given life sentences for murder and *(b)* of these how many remain in detention; and what are the reasons for the difference between the two figures. [101341]

Mr. Boateng: In the 16 years from 1983 to 1998, a total of 3,360 persons were received into Prison Service establishments in England and Wales under sentence for murder. Of these, 2,652 are currently still in custody. The remainder have died or been discharged and these are set out in the table.

Persons sentenced to life imprisonment for murder discharged from prison 1983–98

Type of discharge	*Number*
Release on licence	250
Successful appeal	146
Transfer to psychiatric hospital	144
Transfer to a non Prison Service establishment	50
Pardon/remission	3
Died	80
Deported/repatriated	21
Transfer to another establishment outside England and Wales	14
Total discharges	708

Kosovo

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will offer United Nations investigators the use of DNA testing equipment and trained staff to identify the killer of a Serb killed on Flag Day in Kosovo Polje; and if he will make a statement. [101163]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are doing all we can to support the peacekeeping process in Kosovo and help the International Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) investigate crimes against humanity and will continue to do so. It is for the United Nations investigators involved in this particular case to decide whether DNA evidence may be of value to their investigation. In that event, we would be happy to consider how we might be able to help.

Jury Trial

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the savings from the implementation of his proposals to change the law relating to election for trial by jury. [101371]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 24 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 125W.

Drug-related Offences

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many successful prosecutions there have been for drug-related offences in the Peterlee and Seaham police sub-division in each year since 1995. [101424]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Data are collected on drug offences only, not on offences which may have been committed owing to drug taking. Nor can information be provided at police sub-division level. There is readily available information on proceedings in the Easington Petty Sessional Division for possession of class B drugs. (These drugs are essentially cannabis and amphetamines, and probably account for about 80 per cent. of all drug offences.) In 1995, out of the 25 persons proceeded against in the magistrates court, 22 were sentenced by that court; none were committed for trial to the Crown court. The following year, 1996, 35 out of 39 proceeded against were sentenced by the magistrates court; one person was committed for trial. In 1997, the latest year for which published data are available, 15 out of 18 proceeded against were sentenced in the lower court, while two were committed for trial.

Consultants

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what *(a)* agreements and *(b)* contracts with consultants have been agreed since 1 July for future work, giving in each case the name of the consultants and the project concerned. [101456]

Mr. Straw: The details are as follows.

Agreement

Project	*Consultant*
Technical Support for Emergency Communications Network Management	British Telecom
Fire Service Control and Communications Study	Mott McDonald
Support to Immigration and Nationality Enquiry Bureau	Call Centre Consultancies
Risk Analysis	Parity Solutions
Management Development Support	David Mathew
QA Testing Programme of Case Work Information Technology System	Philip Littleleavon
Provision of Advisory Services	PriceWaterhouseCoopers
Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary report on the Metropolitan Police Services Strategy	Michael Briggs
To Provide advice in the Setting up of the Criminal Records Bureau	Kermon Contract
Police aviation work	Capt. M. Kenworthy
Call handling study	Simon Beresford
Cost Benefit analysis of 'cluster' colleges for Training	Raytheon Systems Ltd.
Encryption Products—International Standards	R. Thorogood
Therapeutic Community Aspect Design Construct Manage and Finance Projects	Elaine Genders
Evaluation Panel support for Doncaster/Buckley	A. de Frisching
Comparison of Alternatives for New Prisons	Mouchel Consulting
Efficiency Review	Capita Business Services
Development of Sex Offender Treatment Programme	Dr. Anna Salter
Management of Suicidal Prisoners	London School of Hygiene
Evaluation of Video Links between Prisoners and Courts	Plotnikoff & Woolfson
Review of Prison Service Training	Mouchel Consulting
Production of Purchasing Manual	Capita Business Services
Review of Inter-prison Transfer Control	Erskine Management

National Minorities Convention

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which organisations responded to the consultation on his Department's *(a)* draft and *(b)* final report to the Council of Europe on the Convention for National Minorities; and what issues they raised. [101505]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A very large number of issues were raised and, therefore, I will write to the hon. Member and set out what is a lengthy list.

Parking Spaces

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the number of parking places at prisons in England and Wales and of the use made of these by prison officers and civilian staff. [101838]

Mr. Boateng: No central record is kept of the number of staff car parking places which exist on the prison estate or of the frequency of use. The Prison Service recognises the need to reduce dependency on the private motor vehicle and endeavours to ensure that car parking at new prisons being planned is kept to the minimum level operationally acceptable.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the extent of parking places at police premises in England and Wales and of the use made of them by police officers and civilian staff. [101839]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None. The information requested is not collected centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

An Audit Commission report published in March this year recommended that all police forces undertake a strategic review of their estate with a view to identifying efficiency savings through rationalisation and better use of resources. Such reviews are likely to include the availability of parking spaces for operational and staff vehicles.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal (Heywood and Middleton)

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people from ethnic minorities have joined the New Deal in Heywood and Middleton constituency since its launch nationally. [100296]

Ms Jowell: By the end of September 1999, 34 young people in Heywood and Middleton constituency who identified their ethnic background as from an ethnic minority group had started on the New Deal. The Government are committed to ensuring that New Deal actively promotes equality of opportunity and outcome for young jobseekers of all ethnic and racial groups, and has published their strategy for engaging ethnic minority jobseekers and businesses in the New Deal.

Ethnic Minorities

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many London local authorities are receiving Section 11 funding. [101044]

Jacqui Smith: In November 1998, the Government announced a new grant, the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG), to replace the education element of the Home Office's Section 11 Grant. EMAG was established to raise standards for those ethnic minority and Traveller pupils particularly at risk of underachieving and to meet the particular needs of pupils for whom English is an Additional Language. All London local authorities received funding through EMAG for 1999–2000. Details of individual allocations, which mirrored Section 11 allocations in 1998–99, are set out in the following table.

Ethnic minority achievement grant 1999–2000: Allocations to local authorities in London

£

Local education authority	Grant
Barking	662,475
Barnet	1,459,113
Bexley	179,781
Brent	2,370,904
Bromley	51,161
Camden	2,931,900
City of London	108,500
Croydon	2,032,254
Ealing	2,949,203
Enfield	2,293,602
Greenwich	1,783,616
Hackney	4,299,222
Hammersmith	940,880
Haringey	3,337,039
Harrow	863,751
Havering	75,640
Hillingdon	629,631
Hounslow	1,829,207
Islington	2,529,175
Kensington and Chelsea	1,177,506
Kingston upon Thames	222,389
Lambeth	3,436,055
Lewisham	2,211,561
Merton	803,895
Newham	253,058
Redbridge	1,965,442
Richmond upon Thames	76,785
Southwark	1,431,818
Sutton	151,345
Tower Hamlets	8,125,390
Waltham Forest	2,054,111
Wandsworth	1,912,879
Westminster	2,151,538

For 2000–01, £162.5 million will be available to local education authorities to improve the attainment of ethnic minority, Traveller and refugee pupils, an increase of 7 per cent. on the amount available for the same purposes in 1999–2000. Provisional allocations for the newly merged Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Grant for 2000–01 were announced in October 1999.

Fresh Start Schools

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what examination and test results of pupils at Fresh Start schools are *(a)* collected and *(b)* published; and if he will make a statement. [101178]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* Fresh Start schools are obliged to follow the National Curriculum. The pupils of Fresh Start schools are therefore tested at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. In addition the pupils will be examined at GCSE/GNVQ and A Level/AGNVQ, where appropriate.

The results of the Key Stage 2 test will be published in the primary performance tables. The results of the GCSE/GNVQ and A Level/AGNVQ will be published in the secondary and 16–18 performance tables respectively.

Teachers' Pay

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many applications have been received for the post of communications strategist in his Department to market the Government's performance-related pay proposals. [101392]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The Department has received 52 applications for the post of Communications Strategist.

As a modern profession, teachers have a right to expect the best communications to ensure they have timely and targeted information to help them do their job well. This post will co-ordinate and streamline all teacher communications.

The post is not about marketing performance-related proposals, but about providing a range of information to teachers.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements he has made to disseminate to local education authorities and schools best practice in the handling of specific learning difficulties *(a)* in special facilities and *(b)* alongside other pupils. [101466]

Jacqui Smith: The Action Programme, published in response to the Green Paper "Excellence for all children: Meeting special educational needs", promotes the inclusion of children with special educational needs within mainstream schooling wherever possible, while recognising the continuing need for special schools for some children. Section 14 of the Education Act 1996 requires local education authorities to have regard to the need for securing that special educational provision is made to these pupils. This duty gives the local education authority a role to decide the organisation of provision to suit the needs of the individual child. The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs which came into effect on 1 September 1994 provides guidance to help identify and assess children who have specific learning difficulties. The Code is currently being revised to strengthen and improve the guidance and provide examples of best practice.

Raising educational standards lies at the very heart of our education policy. This must include children with special educational needs (SEN) whether in mainstream or special schools. To support provision for SEN pupils the Department has taken a number of steps. For example it has provided a grant to the British Dyslexia Association to help them develop the "Achieving Dyslexia Friendly Schools" resource pack which seeks to demonstrate that it is possible to meet the needs of children with mild to moderate dyslexia in a mainstream classroom. Two copies of this pack have been sent to all local education authorities in England. Also the Department has funded and made available the findings of three research projects on inclusion:

"Effective Practice in Inclusion, and in Special and Mainstream Schools Working Together", Manchester University (Published February 1999)

"Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties in Mainstream Schools", Birmingham University (Published January 1999)

"Cost and Outcomes for Pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties in Special and Mainstream Schools", Newcastle University (Published November 1999).

In addition we will be producing examples of good effective links from our Working Group on Special and Mainstream schools in the summer term 2000.

Education Service Providers

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will publish the bid documents and business plans which have been submitted by those companies invited to tender for the management of local authority education services; [101504]

(2) what meetings his Department has had with the London Borough of Islington concerning improving the education service *(a)* by the borough council and *(b)* by a privatised service; [101508]

(3) what criteria he will use to monitor the performance and profits of organisations receiving privatised education services. [101470]

Ms Estelle Morris: Both the documentation leading up to the inclusion of organisations on our list of function providers for LEA intervention, and the bids submitted in specific cases, are treated as commercial in confidence. Officials have had a large number of meetings with Islington Council, involving elected members, officers, headteachers and school staff, in order to discuss urgent action by Islington officers to improve standards and the planned outsourcing of the service. Officials have also been involved in the evaluation of tenders leading to the recent announcement of a preferred service provider. I have personally met Islington members and officers, spoken to groups of headteachers and visited a number of schools. The proposed contract with the preferred service provider remains under negotiation, but it will include arrangements for regular monitoring against service standards, and link payment to the delivery of targets for pupil performance.

School Sixth Forms

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many proposals for *(a)* the introduction and *(b)* the closure of school sixth forms he has received in (i) May 1997 to April 1998, (ii) May 1998 to April 1999 and (iii) in the period since April 1999 respectively; and how many he has (1) accepted, (2) rejected and (3) deferred. [101465]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the number of proposals decided in each of the periods requested since May 1997. No proposals have been deferred but there is one proposal currently under consideration.

	Number approved	*Number rejected*
Proposals to introduce sixth forms		
May 1997-April 1998	6	21
May 1998-April 1999	4	6
May 1999 to date	2	3
Proposals to remove sixth forms		
May 1997-April 1998	—	—
May 1998-April 1999	4	—
May 1999 to date	1	—

CABINET OFFICE

European Regulation

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what appraisals have been produced for extrapolating UK data to cover the rest of the EU with regard to regulatory impact assessments. [100234]

Mr. Stringer: The Government do not keep information in the form requested and could not do so without disproportionate cost.

It is Government policy that all Departments must complete a proper assessment of the risks, costs and benefits in the UK of a new proposal for legislation at either national or European levels. They must show who is affected, and why a non-regulatory option is not possible.

We are keen to see the European Commission improve its existing, similar procedure for scrutinising its own regulatory proposals—it is currently undertaking a review. In the absence of general EU guidance, we have advised Departments that they should extrapolate UK data to cover the rest of the EU when analysing European proposals. This advice is contained in our Guide to Better European Regulation, which was published in July.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference

19. **Valerie Davey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the outcome of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference. [99963]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary attended the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Durban, South Africa on 12–15 November. The meeting took significant decisions on the future of the Commonwealth, the promotion of democracy and human rights, Pakistan, debt, trade and development.

South Caucasus

20. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what policy the European Union has for achieving stability in the countries of the South Caucasus. [99964]

Mr. Vaz: The EU aims to enhance stability by promoting regional co-operation in the South Caucasus and by developing the region's relationship with the EU. The main instruments of its policy are the Partnership and Co-operation Agreements (PCAs), and the TACIS regional programmes TRACECA and INOGATE. The PCAs offer the European Community and its member states a platform to address political, economic and assistance related issues in the region. The EU met the three states together at the launch of the PCAs on 22 June and again for the first meeting of the Co-operation Councils on 12 October, and intends to continue with joint meetings.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

22. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Indian Government and the Pakistani Government regarding the Comprehensive Test Ban treaty; and if he will make a statement. [99967]

Mr. Hain: We frequently discuss non-proliferation issues with India and Pakistan. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary held talks with the Indian National Security Adviser on 27 October. During my recent visit to India, I urged the Indian Government to follow up its public commitment to forge a national consensus on signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Senior officials will hold non-proliferation talks in New Delhi and Islamabad in early December.

Kosovo

23. **Mr. John Cryer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his US counterparts on the use of depleted uranium weapons in the war in Kosovo. [99968]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has had no discussions with his US counterpart on the use of depleted uranium weapons in the war in Kosovo.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Kosovo. [99945]

Mr. Robin Cook: Six months ago Kosovo was terrorised by repression directed from Belgrade. 850,000 people had been expelled from Kosovo and it was run by the Serb army and paramilitaries. Today, KFOR has replaced the VJ. 810,000 of those refugees have been able to return to their homes, the Serb security forces have been expelled and Kosovo is run by a UN administration.

Formidable challenges remain in creating a Kosovo that is at peace with itself and with its neighbours. We wholeheartedly condemn the minority of Kosovars who have not seized the opportunity to build a Kosovo free from fear but have perpetuated the cycle of violence. But the position of the great majority of the people of Kosovo is far better now than it was under Milosevic's brutality or than it would have been if NATO had not intervened to end it.

Russia

24. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the United Kingdom's bilateral relations with Russia. [99969]

Mr. Vaz: Relations with Russia, and her stability and development, remain important for the United Kingdom. The UK has already done much to help Russia with the difficult process of change: there is a strong UK interest in further progress. Our relationship enables us to speak frankly about areas of disagreement, including Chechnya.

Drugs Trade

25. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of British policy on combating the international trade in illicit drugs. [99970]

Mr. Battle: FCO co-ordinates the overseas drugs efforts of the relevant Government Departments including HM Customs and Excise and the Home Office. We also work to improve the effectiveness of the various international anti-drugs bodies, including at the UN and EU.

FCO activity is fully within the Government's 10 year anti-drug strategy under the UK's Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator, Keith Hellawell. Specifically, the FCO co-ordinates supply side overseas activity contributing to meeting the objective of reducing the availability of legal drugs in the UK.

We spend £6 million per year, on supporting projects worldwide within the framework of the UK drugs strategy to prevent the production and trafficking to the UK of Class A drugs, particularly heroin and cocaine.

European Commission (Accountability)

26. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what issues relating to the accountability of the European Commission are on the agenda for the next IGC; and if he will make a statement. [99972]

Mr. Vaz: The forthcoming IGC will consider the institutional changes that are needed to prepare for the next enlargement. The Government fully support this. Enlargement is not just about the applicant countries preparing to join the Union, it is also about the current member states preparing to receive them.

Trade Promotion

27. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what criteria and performance measures relating to the promotion of United Kingdom trade his Department uses in its annual appraisals of each of the United Kingdom's Ambassadors and High Commissioners. [99973]

Mr. Hain: All Ambassadors and High Commissioners now report to the Chief Executive of British Trade International, the unified FCO and DTI operation, on trade promotion and development work. Their performance will be assessed against annual objectives agreed with British Trade International.

Entry Clearance Visas (Islamabad)

28. **Mr. Gerrard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what are the current waiting times for interviews for entry clearance visas for *(a)* spouses and *(b)* fiancées in Islamabad. [99975]

Mr. Vaz: As at 26 November, the waiting time in Islamabad for interview for spouses was 38 weeks and for fiancées 46 weeks.

EU Enlargement

29. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what further action he is taking to promote the enlargement of the EU. [99976]

Mr. Vaz: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral answer given by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary today to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis).

30. **Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out the Government's approach to greater EU integration at the next IGC. [99977]

Mr. Vaz: The forthcoming IGC will consider the institutional changes that are needed to prepare for the next enlargement. The Government fully support this. Enlargement is not just about the applicant countries preparing to join the Union, it is also about the current member states preparing to receive them.

EU Legislation

31. **Mr. Leigh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the European Commission concerning the volume of legislation produced by the European Union. [99978]

Mr. Vaz: The Commission agrees with us that what counts is not the amount of legislation, but whether it is necessary, efficient and proportionate. That is why the Government pushed successfully for the Subsidiarity Protocol at the Amsterdam IGC, to ensure that legislation is only directed at those areas which require it.

Argentina

32. **Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made towards normalising relations between Argentina and the Falkland Islands. [99979]

Mr. Battle: The visit to Britain last autumn by President Menem of Argentina and the Visit of His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales to Argentina this March have helped to develop a new spirit of reconciliation and co-operation between our two countries. Later this week I shall accompany His Royal Highness The Duke of York to Buenos Aires for the inauguration of the new Argentine President De La Rua.

An important milestone in improving relations with Argentina was the Joint Statement that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the Argentine Foreign Minister signed in July.

Air links between the Falklands and South America have been restored and safeguarded as a result, and now include a monthly flight to southern Argentina. Co-operation has been stepped up to conserve fish stocks in the South-West Atlantic. And the Falkland Islands Government now allow holders of Argentine passports to visit.

All these measures have the support of the Islanders' elected Councillors. Their role in this dialogue is instrumental. None of these measures affects our solid commitment to defend the Islanders' right to determine their own future. The sovereignty of the Falklands is not for negotiation.

Nigeria

33. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the safety of British oil workers following the upsurge of violence in the oil-producing areas of Nigeria. [99980]

Mr. Hain: Our consular staff in Lagos are in close contact with the Community Liaison Officers and contacts within the business and NGO community in the region. There is a warden network in place to pass on advice to the British community.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice has been advising against all holiday and non-essential travel to the Niger Delta region of Nigeria since 12 August 1999. It had been warning of violent incidents in the region for some considerable time longer.

UN Security Council

34. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it is his policy that the EU should have a seat on the UN Security Council [99981]

Mr. Hain: Under the UN Charter, an EU seat is not possible as membership of the Security Council is confined to states. The Treaty on European Union already makes provision for how EU member states should act when on the Security Council:

> "Member states which are also members of the United Nations Security Council will concert and keep the other member states fully informed. Member states which are permanent members of the Security Council will, in the execution of their functions, ensure the defence of the positions and the interests of the Union, without prejudice to their responsibilities under the provisions of the United Nations Charter."

East Timor

35. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the UN's initiatives in East Timor and Indonesia. [99982]

Mr. Battle: The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), which will have overall responsibility for administration and security in the territory, continues to deploy. The handover from the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) to UNTAET's Peace-Keeping operation will take place as soon as possible taking into account conditions on the ground.

EU Qualified Majority Voting

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will raise the extension of qualified majority voting at the next inter-governmental conference. [99962]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Cologne European Council in June agreed that the possible extension of qualified majority voting would be on the agenda for the next IGC.

Our own position on QMV is clear. We are happy to look at extension on a case-by-case basis. Where QMV is in Britain's interests, we will support it. But where key areas of national interest are at stake, such as Treaty change, border controls, defence or taxation, we will insist on retaining unanimity.

Falkland Islands

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about progress on the implementation of the agreement he signed with Argentina on 14 July regarding the Falkland Islands. [101821]

Mr. Battle: A number of the measures set out in the British-Argentine Joint Statement of 14 July have already been implemented. The Falkland Islands Government have admitted Argentine passport-holders to the Falklands since July. All deadlines have been met to restore air links between the Falklands and South America and to introduce measures to combat the common menace of poaching of fish stocks.

We continue to consolidate progress on the remaining issues. We are working with Argentina on a Memorandum of Understanding on the terms of a study to determine the cost and feasibility of removing the remaining land mines from the Falklands. Both sides continue to work towards a multilateral arrangement to regulate fishing in the high seas of the South-West Atlantic. An Argentine architect has recently visited the Falklands to discuss proposals for construction of a memorial at the Argentine cemetery there. The Argentine Government are committed to review their use of Falklands place names.

None of these developments affect our commitment to defend the Islanders' right to determine their own future. The sovereignty of the Falkland Islands is not for negotiation.

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what guarantees have been given to the Saudi Government in relation to potential nuclear threats to that country. [101459]

Mr. Hain: None.

Belize

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what official engagements ministers fulfilled in Belize between 1990 and 1999. [101739]

Mr. Battle: I can answer only for the period since May 1997.

Since May 1997, the only FCO Minister to have visited Belize is the then Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), who visited Belize in February 1998. His programme included official calls on the then Prime Minister, Mr. Manuel Esquivel, the then Foreign Minister, Mr. Dean Barrow, and the then Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Said Musa. My hon. Friend also called on the Department of Corrections, the Youth Enhancement Academy and Hattieville Prison.

South America

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what inquiries have been made by the British Embassy in Anuncion into the safety and security of documents relating to Operation Condor being held by authorities in Paraguay. [101620]

Mr. Battle: Documents relating to Operation Condor are among the records held by the Centre of Documentation and Archives for the Defence of Human Rights. They are stored on the premises of the Supreme Court of Paraguay. Our Ambassador has spoken to people concerned with their safekeeping, and is not aware of any current threat to the safety and security of the documents.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assistance his Department is giving to drug eradication projects in *(a)* Colombia, *(b)* Ecuador, *(c)* Bolivia and *(d)* Peru. [101512]

Mr. Battle: The FCO is not providing assistance to drug eradication projects in Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia or Peru. The main focus of FCO counter-drugs assistance in these countries is on interdiction/law enforcement training. We are currently supporting two UN International Drugs Programmes (UNDCP) projects in alternative development for Bolivia and Peru through DFID.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what support and assistance his Department is providing to civic and human rights groups in *(a)* Colombia, *(b)* Ecuador, *(c)* Bolivia and *(d)* Peru. [101511]

Mr. Battle: The information is as follows:

(a) Columbia: Our Embassy in Bogota maintains close contacts with a range of civic and human rights groups in Colombia. Through the FCO's Conflict Prevention Fund and the Embassy's Small Grants Scheme, we have contributed funds to a number of groups, such as The Citizen's Mandate for Peace, Life and Liberty Project Fund, which encourages debate within civil society. We have also contributed funds towards human rights organisations monitoring the human rights situation in the department of Antioquia (amongst the most violent departments in Colombia). We also provide human rights training to the Colombian Police Force.

(b) Ecuador: We work closely with a number of independent human rights groups including the Human Rights Permanent Assembly (APDH) and the Latin American Human Rights Association (ALDHU). More than £41,000 has been disbursed from the Human Rights Project Fund this financial year to promote rights awareness in Ecuador. This includes funding for a project being administered by APDH to encourage young people to learn about their human, social, economic and cultural rights and how to promote them. In addition, the British Embassy in Quito are supporting a number of other projects aimed at helping street children, indigenous groups and disadvantaged women.

(c) Bolivia: £42,500 has been provided this financial year from the Human Rights Project Fund to support the office of the Human Rights Ombudsman. The Ombudsman, Mrs. Ana Maria Romero, paid a successful Foreign and Commonwealth Office Sponsored Visit to the UK in November 1999. The main purpose of her visit was to see how the British Government promote human rights. Our Embassy in La Paz have close contacts with a number of human rights groups in Bolivia including Red Andina, CEDOIN, the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights and AMANACER, a charity which helps street children.

(d) Peru: We maintain close and regular contact with a number of NGOs and independent human rights groups in Peru including the National Co-ordinator for Human Rights, an umbrella organisation which represents more than 50 NGOs working in the human rights field. We also maintain close contact with both the Ombudsman and the Ad Hoc Commission of Human Rights. In November 1999, the Deputy Ombudsman of Peru, Dr. Gino Costa, paid a successful FCO Sponsored Visit to the UK. He attended a human rights seminar in the House

of Lords, and was keen to hear about HMG's policies on human rights, particularly in the context of Northern Ireland. We have provided £61,961 this financial year from the Human Rights Project Fund to assist the Ombudsman and Commission with its work and research. In November, the Department for International Development provided more than £20,000 for an electoral assistance project in Peru. More than £93,000 has been disbursed since April 1999 from HRPF to support projects administered by independent human rights groups.

Southern Sudan

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Southern Sudan. [99958]

Mr. Hain: We continue to be deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation in the Sudan. While our immediate priority is to provide humanitarian assistance, the long-term answer is peace.

We have long supported the Inter-Governmental Authority on development (IGAD) peace process as the negotiating body most likely to bring about a negotiated and sustainable peace settlement. Recently, as an active member of the IGAD Partners Forum (IPF), we extended our commitment, pledging political and financial support to a permanent secretariat with full-time Special Envoy. This should allow for a sustained and accelerated negotiation to take place.

After an absence of 11 months, we now have full diplomatic representation in Khartoum. We are therefore in a better position to support the cause of peace in the Sudan.

Iran

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on human rights in Iran. [99951]

Mr. Hain: There have been a number of significant improvements in Iran's human rights record since President Khatami's election in May 1997. We welcome the Iranian government's commitment to develop an Islamic civil society based on respect for the rule of law. The people of Iran now enjoy significantly greater freedom of expression, despite recent closures of a number of reformist publications, many of which have subsequently reopened under different titles, compared to two years ago. February's local council elections, the first in Iran's history, were also particularly welcome, putting local power in the hands of the people and re-affirming the Iranian people's support for the reform process. There have also been some modest improvements in the situation of women, notably with the appointment of Iran's first four women judges and its first woman Vice-President. Over 50 per cent. of the university intake in Iran is now female.

However, we and our EU partners have a number of outstanding concerns. We in conjunction with our EU partners co-sponsored the United Nations General Assembly resolution on human rights in Iran adopted on 18 November which again underlined continuing international concern about certain Iranian human rights policies. We remain particularly concerned about the discrimination practised against some religious minorities (notably the Baha'is), the continued detention on espionage charges of a number of Iranians, including 13 members of the Iranian Jewish community, the violations of the legal rights of prisoners, and the high number of executions. There is continuing discrimination against women in the courts and society generally. We and our EU partners continue to raise these issues with the Iranian authorities in an effort to improve Iran's human rights record.

TREASURY

Tobacco Smuggling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to tackle tobacco smuggling. [101320]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government will continue to adopt a tough and rigorous approach to detecting, deterring and preventing tobacco smuggling and fraud. In his Pre-Budget Report the Chancellor announced a package of new measures to strengthen Customs' ability to tackle tobacco smuggling and fraud including x-ray scanners and compulsory marking of UK duty paid cigarettes and tobacco, and new offences and penalties for those caught handling or selling unmarked tobacco products.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to encourage other EU member states to increase tobacco taxation in order to reduce incentives for bootlegging. [101319]

Dawn Primarolo: The European Commission is due to review tobacco taxation in the coming year and to report the outcome to ECOFIN.

The Government will continue to take every opportunity, in ECOFIN and elsewhere, to seek to influence the Commission and other member states to introduce a duty structure which would reduce the incentive for both legal cross-border shopping and smuggling.

Tax Investigations

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what appeal procedures are available to taxpayers who believe they are unfairly targeted by Inland Revenue inspectors or subjected to investigation without reasonable grounds for suspicion. [101365]

Dawn Primarolo: Any person whose tax return is the subject of an inquiry may appeal to the General Commissioners for a direction that the inquiry should cease. The Commissioners must make such a direction unless there are reasonable grounds for the inquiry to continue. This right is explained in a leaflet which is sent to all taxpayers whose returns are the subject of an inquiry.

The Inland Revenue may begin an inquiry into a person's tax return without needing to suspect that anything may be wrong. Once an inspector has made sufficient inquiries to satisfy himself that a return is correct, he should end the investigation, and internal guidance and training make this clear. The taxpayer's right of appeal is an additional safeguard.

The Inland Revenue is committed to treating everyone fairly. However, where a person believes that he is being unfairly targeted, there is a well-established

formal complaints procedure. Where the complaint cannot be resolved by the local office or the regional office, it is referred to the Adjudicator, Dame Barbara Mills. Alternatively, a complaint to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration ("the Parliamentary Ombudsman") may be made through a Member of Parliament.

Free School Meals

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what component of Disability Working Allowance compensates for non-entitlement to free school meals; [101145]

(2) what is the estimated value of the amount included in *(a)* Working Families Tax Credit and *(b)* Disabled Persons Tax Credit as compensation for non-entitlement to free school meals. [101143]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answers 2 December 1999]:* Disability Working Allowance was introduced in 1992 and was broadly based on Family Credit. When the Family Credit scheme was introduced in 1988, provision was made to replace the value of entitlement to free school meals by adding £2.55 a week to each child credit. The total child credit has since been uprated annually by the Rossi index.

Disabled Persons Tax Credit and Working Families Tax Credit which replaced Disability Working Allowance and Family Credit respectively were introduced on 5 October 1999.

Duty Free Allowances

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to provide information to travellers at UK ports of entry on the duty free allowances. [101628]

Dawn Primarolo: Posters explaining the allowances are displayed at ports of entry. Leaflets setting out the allowances are published by HM Customs and Excise and are freely available.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what arrangements his Department has made for information on the Working Families Tax Credit to be displayed and available to the public at *(a)* health centres, *(b)* dentists' surgeries, *(c)* GPs' surgeries, *(d)* post offices, *(e)* public libraries and *(f)* other venues. [101630]

Dawn Primarolo: In advance of the start of the advertising campaign, WFTC literature was made available free of charge to 21,000 intermediary organisations throughout the UK and Northern Ireland. As a result of this:

4,700 he[illegible] centres and GP surgeries now display WFTC factsheets.

Dentists, pharmacists and GP surgeries will also shortly be supplied with posters promoting the 'passporting' benefits of WFTC.

Main Post Offices display posters and factsheets and in September, in-house television featured WFTC information every 15 minutes. All other post offices display factsheets.

Up to 450 public libraries now display WFTC leaflets and posters.

Jobcentres featured large window posters, and had leaflets, posters and postcards available inside. WFTC information was printed on vacancy cards and appointment slips.

Public inquiry areas in Inland Revenue offices and Benefits Agency offices display WFTC leaflets and posters.

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in North West Norfolk he estimates will benefit from the Working Families Tax Credit; and by how much he estimates each family will on average benefit. [101321]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates for the numbers in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit in North West Norfolk are not available. It is estimated that in 2000–01 for the UK as a whole, the first full year of the Working Families Tax Credit, about 1.4 million families will enjoy the more generous help provided by the new scheme. Families in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit will receive on average £24 a week more than they would on Family Credit.

Gold and Currency Reserves

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of the United Kingdom's total gold and currency reserves is now held in euros; what is the total holding of euros; what was their cost; and what is their current market value. [101684]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Table 2 of the Quarterly Report on UK Official Holdings of Foreign Currency and Gold for the period July to September 1999, published on 2 December provides a breakdown of the size and composition of the United Kingdom's reserve holdings.

EU Competition Law

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if UK tax provisions are subject to scrutiny under EU competition law. [101606]

Dawn Primarolo: No, provided they do not constitute state aids under Article 87 of the Treaty which has been in existence since 1957.

Advance Corporation Tax (Charities)

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the additional tax per annum paid by bodies in the charitable sector as a result of the abolition of Advance Corporation Tax credits. [101814]

Dawn Primarolo: Charities have paid no additional tax as a result of the withdrawal of payable tax credits on dividends.

Single Currency

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he plans to encourage private sector firms to intensify their preparations for possible future British membership of the euro. [101811]

Miss Melanie Johnson: It is up to individual businesses to decide how best to make any changeover if the UK decides to join the single currency. The Government's role is to provide the planning framework. That is why we published the outline national changeover plan in February 1999.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what degree of labour market flexibility *(a)* within the UK and *(b)* between the UK and other EU countries would be sufficient to deal with the problems posed by asymmetric shocks were Britain to join the single currency. [101819]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the right hon. Member to "UK Membership of the single currency, an assessment of the five economic tests", published by the Treasury in October 1997, copies of which are available in the Library.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what economic indicators will be used in determining whether his five economic tests for EMU membership have been satisfied. [101818]

Miss Melanie Johnson: "UK Membership of the single currency, an assessment of the five economic tests", published by the Treasury in October 1997 used a wide range of economic indicators in determining whether the economic case for joining the single currency was clear and unambiguous.

Community Sports Clubs (Taxation)

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much tax was paid by community sports clubs in the form of *(a)* inheritance tax, *(b)* VAT, *(c)* capital taxes and *(d)* income tax in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [101722]

Dawn Primarolo: There is no liability for inheritance tax or income tax for the types of organisation that run community sports clubs. Statistics on VAT, capital taxes and corporation tax paid by such clubs are not available.

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will give community sports clubs comparable status to charities as regards exemption from taxes. [101723]

Dawn Primarolo: Some sports organisations already qualify as charities and so enjoy the same tax benefits as other charities. In addition, many non-charitable sports clubs are exempt from direct tax on the income they earn from their members and from VAT on their playing members' subscriptions.

The Charity Commission plans to consult next year on the extent to which sport is a charitable purpose in its own right.

Credit Unions

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to encourage the establishment and development of credit unions. [101727]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Two reports were published on 16 November which include moves to boost credit unions. The report by the Credit Unions Taskforce, under the chairmanship of Fred Goodwin, investigated ways in which banks and building societies could help credit unions, and the report by the Policy Action Team looked at ways to improve individual access to financial services.

There will be a new central services organisation for credit unions to help them to deliver a more consistent and flexible service to members. Improved regulation by the Financial Services Authority will ensure that credit union members enjoy similar protection to savers in banks and building societies. A number of deregulatory measures, including increasing the maximum repayment periods for loans, removing the maximum membership limit and allowing credit unions to charge for ancillary services will also be implemented.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate his Department has made of the net outflow of revenue from *(a)* the North West and *(b)* the North East of England under his revised proposals for a climate change levy. [101703]

Mr. Timms: The climate change levy is designed to be revenue neutral for the private sector as a whole, with all the revenues raised being fully recycled back to business through a cut in employers' National Insurance Contributions (NICs) and additional support for energy efficiency measures. The levy package is also expected to be broadly neutral between manufacturing and services.

It is not possible to say what the exact impact of the levy on specific regions will be. That will depend on a number of factors, including, for example, the future energy consumption of firms in the region, the level of employment in those firms, the number of energy intensive sectors in the region, what use firms in the region make of electricity generated from 'new' renewable sources of energy and in 'good quality' combined heat and power plants, and the extent to which firms in the region take advantage of the proposed introduction of a system of enhanced capital allowances for energy saving investments.

Benefits (Newcastle Upon Tyne)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate how many claimants of Family Credit, *(a)* with and *(b)* without child care disregards, there were in the City of Newcastle upon Tyne, what the average estimated value was of each credit payment and child care disregard, in 1997; and how many claimants of Working Family Tax Credit, working families tax credit child care payments, Disabled Persons Tax Credit, and DPTC child care payments there are in Newcastle upon Tyne at present, with the average value of payment in each case. [101845]

Dawn Primarolo: As at August 1997 there were 4,300 Family Credit cases within the Newcastle upon Tyne Local Authority district, with an average weekly award of Family Credit of £62.84. The number of cases with allowed child care costs is too small to provide a reliable estimate at this level. Reliable estimates for the numbers in receipt of the Working Families' Tax Credit and Disabled Persons' Tax Credit in Newcastle upon Tyne are not yet available.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what lower age limit is contained in his proposals on the availability of tax incentives for stakeholder pension plans. [101378]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The joint DSS/Inland Revenue consultation paper "Stakeholder Pensions: The Tax Regime—The Government's Proposals" issued on 16 September did not contain a lower age limit for the

availability of stakeholder pensions. We will announce our intentions on all aspects of the stakeholder tax regime when we have considered the responses to the consultation.

Entertainment Industry

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect of the provisions of the Financial Services and Markets Bill on the ability of theatres and other arts organisations to raise finances. [101088]

Miss Melanie Johnson: A further consultation document on the regulation of Financial Promotion under the Bill was published in October. It included proposals aimed at removing unnecessary impediments to raising finance.

The deadline for responses to this consultation exercise is 28 January 2000. The Government would welcome the views of the theatre and other industries.

IT Contractors

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of IR35 on contractors working within the information technology industry. [101089]

Dawn Primarolo: Our proposals will ensure that everyone who meets the accepted definition of an employee, whether in the IT industry or elsewhere, will pay tax and National Insurance Contributions on a fair basis.

Public Service Pensions

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to increase public service pensions from April 2000. [102026]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Legislation governing public service pensions requires public service pensions to be increased annually by the same percentage as State earnings related pensions (additional pensions). My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security announced on 9 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 907W, that benefits such as additional pensions will be increased by 1.1 per cent., in line with the annual increase in the Retail Prices Index up to September 1999. Public service pensions will therefore be increased by 1.1 per cent. from 10 April 2000, except those which have been in payment for less than a year, which will receive a pro-rata increase.

Stock Exchange

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes in the arrangements for dissemination of price-sensitive information by officially-listed companies are planned following the proposed transfer of the UK Listing Authority from the London Stock Exchange to the Financial Services Authority. [102027]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Listed companies are currently required under the Listing Rules to submit announcements to the Exchange's Company Announcements Office for distribution to the public through the Regulatory News Service. Although the Listing Rules do allow for simultaneous notification of announcements to other news organisations, we consider it would be inappropriate to retain this requirement other than for a transitional period when, subject to Parliament approving the necessary legislation, the FSA becomes the Competent Authority for listing. I have therefore asked the FSA to undertake a review of the arrangements for the dissemination of price sensitive information by listed companies and to come forward with amendments to the current Listing Rules requirements in this area. The FSA will be launching a consultation exercise with interested parties to devise alternative arrangements.

Tobacco Duty

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will introduce pack marks on tobacco products to indicate that UK duty has been paid. [102028]

Mr. Timms: The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a pack marking scheme for tobacco products in his Pre-Budget Statement. The scheme will become effective from 1 April 2001.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Pigmeat

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to ensure that consumers can determine the country of origin of pigmeat products at the point of sale through correct labelling. [99048]

Ms Quin: We are considering all interested parties on guidance aimed at ensuring that country of origin markings on food labels do not mislead consumers about the true origin of the ingredients that have been used. We also intend to promote changes to European and international rules and advice to ensure that consumers are given accurate information about the true origin of the foods they are buying.

Poultry

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many poultry birds were being reared in intensive breeding units in England and Wales on 1 November. [99526]

Ms Quin: The total number of poultry birds reared for meat production in England and Wales, as reported in the Agricultural Census published 1 November, is shown as follows. There is currently no provision to distinguish between the production methods used.

As at 1 June 1999	*England*
Broilers	77,545,000
Turkeys	9,100,000
All other poultry	4,944,000

Figures for 1999 for Wales are not yet available. A provisional total for broilers is 6,650,000. The figures for 1998 are as follows:

As at 1 June 1998	*Wales*
Broilers	7,087,300
Turkeys	622,000
All other poultry	1,834,600

Meat Labelling

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ensure that pork imports from countries where standards of animal welfare are lower than in the UK carry information to this effect. [99756]

Ms Quin: We are consulting all interested parties on guidance aimed at ensuring that country of origin markings on food labels do not mislead consumers about the true origin of the ingredients that have been used. We also intend to promote changes to European and international labelling rules and advice to ensure that consumers are given accurate information about the true origin of the foods they are buying. This will provide the necessary choice for consumers. In the meantime we will continue to encourage retailers, caterers and public procurement authorities to source their supplies of pork and pork products to British standards.

Badgers (TB)

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to recommence badger culling in those TB study areas where activity has been suspended. [100273]

Ms Quin: We announce the general locations of the culling trial areas and have released such information for the five triplets presently enrolled in the trial. But for reasons of staff safety and landowner privacy operational details, including the precise location and timing of operations, are not publicised.

Farmers Markets

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent advice he has issued to local authorities with regard to the regulation of farmers markets. [100276]

Ms Quin: None, but MAFF officials have held discussions with the National Association of British Market Authorities, who represent local authorities with established markets.

Tallow

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the total income received to date from the sale of tallow from rendered carcase material under the over-thirty-month scheme; and what estimate he has made of the income in each year for the expected duration of the scheme. [100826]

Ms Quin: It is not possible to predict with any certainty income from the sale of the 200,000 tonnes of Over-Thirty-Month Scheme (OTMS) tallow held in store, as there are costs associated with its removal from store and transport to the point of destruction. Similar costs do not arise in respect of OTMS renderers burning tallow they produce to fuel their processes, thus replacing oil or gas. To date some 83,000 tonnes of OTMS tallow have been sold to renderers generating an income of around £2.7 million. Contracts exist for the sale to renderers of new production OTMS tallow and this is expected to generate an annual income of over £1 million until the end of the scheme.

Fisheries

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on *(a)* the timescale in section 32 of the Cologne Council Conclusions for integrating environmental issues and sustainable development into fisheries matters and *(b)* current discussions on the discard system. [100997]

Mr. Morley: The information is as follows:

(a) Section 32 of the Cologne European Council Conclusions calls upon the European Commission to report back during 2000 on progress in the integration of environmental issues and sustainable development into fisheries policy. The Government fully supports such integration and will be encouraging the European Commission to meet this commitment.

(b) Discarding remains a significant concern of the Government. A range of research is placed on the extent of discarding. In addition, we are part funding the collaborative international study by Nautilus Consultants, as referred to in the reply given to the hon. Member on 29 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 1045W. The new EU technical conservation measures that will become operative from 1 January 2000, are designed to reduce discards. We shall be monitoring their impact.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the countries of the European Union which are allowed to fish in British fishing waters. [101043]

Mr. Morley: Vessels from France, the Republic of Ireland, Germany, Netherlands and Belgium have limited rights to fish within UK six to twelve mile territorial waters. The details of the areas and species for which access is granted are set out in Annexe I of EU Council Regulation 3760/92.

Beef on the Bone

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to lift the ban on beef on the bone. [101072]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to my right hon. Friend the Minister's oral statement to the House on 30 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 151. Subject to the outcome of the statutory consultation now underway, and Parliamentary approval of the necessary legislative changes, it is the Government's intention to lift the retail ban on beef-on-the bone with effect from Friday 17 December. A copy of the consultation package is available in the Library of the House.

Forestry Commission

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the sale of Forestry Commission forest land. [101370]

Mr. Morley: We have stopped large scale sales of forest land by the Forestry Commission. Our policy is that the Commission may only sell agricultural land, land associated with houses and other buildings, unplantable land and relatively small and isolated blocks of forest land which do not make a significant contribution to its objectives and which are surplus to its requirements. The Commission may also sell areas for development where this is in the public interest. Areas of forest land which are important for public access will not be sold unless an access agreement is in place.

French Turkeys

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what checks are made on the ingredients in the feed given to turkeys in the principal French production units supplying the British market. [101076]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* Checks on feed ingredients to ensure compliance with extensive EC controls are a matter for the French authorities.

Potatoes

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to ensure the combating of woody nightshade in areas susceptible to brown rot of potatoes where the watercourses are within internal drainage board areas. [101294]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* An exercise is under way to eradicate the bacterium which causes potato brown rot (*Ralstonia solanacearum*) from watercourses in East Anglia where it is known to occur, by eliminating woody nightshade plants which act as a host for the bacterium. This work is being carried out in conjunction with the Environment Agency, the British Potato Council and, in the Middle Level drainage area, the Middle Level Commissioners. Information on the project has been sent to all growers with water abstraction licences in the areas concerned.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ensure that all imported bacon is labelled so as to indicate if it was raised in accord with UK levels of animal welfare. [100101]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* We are consulting all interested parties on guidance aimed at ensuring that country of origin markings on food labels including those on bacon, do not mislead consumers about the true origin of the ingredients used. We also intend to promote changes to European and international labelling rules and advice to ensure that consumers are given accurate information about the true origin of the foods they are buying. In the meantime, we will continue to encourage retailers, caterers and public procurement authorities to source their supplies of pork and pork products to British standards.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will strengthen the prohibition on the routine tail-docking of piglets in the proposed new Regulations on the Welfare of Farmed Animals to ensure that tail-docking is carried out only after consideration of other methods which might prevent tail-biting, and only on the advice of a veterinary surgeon; and if he will make a statement. [101635]

Mr. Morley: This is one suggestion that has been made in response to the consultation on the new Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations. It is under consideration along with the many other comments received.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he plans to take to press the European Commission to submit to the Council the report and proposals on intensive pig farming required by Article 6 of Council Directive 91/630; and if he will make a statement. [101636]

Mr. Morley: We lose no opportunity to remind the Commission of their obligation to bring forward various overdue proposals on animal welfare, including that required by Article 6 of Council Directive 91/630.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he has asked the Farm Animal Welfare Council to review the question of leg problems in broilers; and if he will make a statement; [101632]

(2) if he will commission an independent study to assess the incidence of leg weakness in the UK broiler chicken flock; and if he will make a statement. [101633]

Mr. Morley: The Farm Animal Welfare Council continues to monitor leg health in broiler chickens and is evaluating data on leg health provided by the industry. We shall consider the position when further advice from FAWC is received.

Agenda 2000

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the implementation of "Agenda 2000: A New Direction for Agriculture". [102025]

Mr. Nick Brown: I announced today a package of measures which will radically redirect support for agriculture in fulfilment of pledges made in our manifesto and subsequently. My announcement focused on one particular aspect—the Rural Development Regulation.

Our decision in implementing options under all of the sectors of the Agenda 2000 reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy will have an important impact upon the future direction of the agricultural industry.

Beef Regime

Under the beef regime, we have decided to use the National Envelope to top up payments to suckler cow producers in the year 2000; the position for future years will be reviewed, in particular to consider the possibility of introducing area-based payments on permanent pasture used for low-density beef production in England.

We will retain the 90-head limit on beef special premium claims and introduce a UK-wide national ceiling against which the need for scale-back will be assessed; both these decisions will be reviewed in the course of the year 2000.

We have also decided to implement the cut in Suckler Cow Premium quota by reducing producers' holdings of quota on a flat-rate basis (probably at around 4 per cent.); producers who have reduced production below their

quota level as a result of participation in an EU-funded extensification scheme or who can show that the imposition of the cut would materially jeopardise the success of a development plan in progress on 1 January 2000 may apply for exemption from this quote-cut.

We will increase from the year 2000 onwards the milk quota limit for dairy producers claiming Suckler Cow Premium, from 120,000 kilograms to 180,000 kilograms.

We will apply a less restrictive two-tier model for extensification payments additional to payments under the Beef Special Premium and Suckler Cow Premium Schemes; and assess eligibility for extensification payments on cattle numbers on producers' holdings on six dates each year, notified to producers retrospectively; this method of assessment will be reviewed as and when our cattle database becomes fully operational, when it includes movement details for older animals.

Dairy regime

In relation to the dairy regime, we will be extending the quota leasing deadline from 31 December to 31 March with effect from the next quota year. At the same time, the deadline for processing permanent transfers of quota via a lease of land—though not for other transfers—is being advanced to 1 March in order to ensure that the Intervention Board meets its deadline on the levy calculation. There was no widespread support for the other discretionary provisions set out in the consultation papers and these changes will not be implemented.

Cross-compliance

CAP reforms agreed in Berlin also gave powers for member states to attach specific environmental conditions to agricultural support payments, if they consider this to be appropriate. Our consultation exercise sought views on whether to introduce such conditions. Some relevant considerations in deciding whether to do so are: comprehensibility to farmers; ease of enforcement; environmental benefit; and extent of additional costs or regulatory burden for the generality of farmers.

We are still considering the responses to the England consultation on this issue. However, if following this consideration we identified possible cross-compliance measures, we would hold a further consultation exercise on any specific proposals before introducing them. Meanwhile, we will be retaining our existing cross-compliance measures which the UK has applied for some years, namely the current overgrazing condition in our livestock subsidy regimes and the management conditions for set-aside land.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 8 December 1999

SOCIAL SECURITY

War Pensions Agency

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement about the outcome of the recent quinquennial Prior Options Review of the War Pensions Agency. [102323]

Mr. Bayley: A Prior Options Review of the administration of the war pensions scheme was recently undertaken to examine whether further improvements in customer service and value for money could be made.

Part of that review involved an evaluation of the performance of the War Pensions Agency since its creation in April 1994. The Evaluation Report has been published today and copies have been placed in the Library. The Report recognises that, after a difficult start because of very high workloads, the management focus provided by agency status helped bring about steadily improving standards of performance over the last five years.

We have now considered the Review Team's recommendations. These take account of a number of detailed submissions from national and local user representative organisations. I am grateful to all those who participated in the review.

The review has recognised that over the past five years the War Pensions Agency has dedicated itself to serving a very special group of people, those who have suffered injury or bereavement in defence of their country. The main conclusions of the review, which I support, are that the War Pensions Agency should remain a Next Steps Agency within the Civil Service responsible, as now, for administering the existing war pensions scheme.

The review recognises the significant improvements in customer service and efficiency which the Agency has achieved since its inception in 1994. These reflect great efforts by the Chief Executive and his staff. The review's recommendations are designed to build on this work and will be supported by the Agency's programme of change which is aimed at improving its decision-making and appeals processes. This will be done through extended use of information technology and closer working with other government departments and voluntary sector bodies.

We will shortly publish a reviewed Framework Document confirming the Agency's responsibilities for the next five years.

Carers (Financial Support)

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to raise the level of earnings disregard for the calculation of invalid care allowance. [101352]

Mr. Bayley *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The National Carers strategy committed the Government to keeping financial support for carers under review, which we are doing.

Income Support

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what levels of take-up of Income Support for pensioners are assumed in current forecasts of expenditure. [99942]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* Estimates of take-up levels are difficult to forecast. Our current estimates are derived from the Family Resource Survey and show that for 1997–98 between 71 per cent. and 85 per cent. of pensioners by expenditure claimed the Income Support to which they are entitled. Current caseload forecasts assume that an additional 43,000 pensioners will take up their entitlement during the forecasting period. This estimate will need to be reviewed in the light of our plans for a national programme to increase pensioner take-up.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

EU Charter of Human Rights

Mr. Borrow: To ask the President of the Council who will be Parliament's representative on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights drafting body. [102231]

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) and Lord Bowness will be the Westminster delegates on the Charter drafting body. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) and Baroness Howells of St. Davids will be the alternates.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Gamma Hydroxy Butyrate

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ban gamma hydroxy butyrate; and if he will make a statement. [101518]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Gamma hydroxy butyrate (GHB) is not controlled under the international drug Conventions nor under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 but its importation, manufacture, sale and supply fall within the scope of the medicines legislation. The Medicines Control Agency (MCA) investigates reports of the unlawful manufacture, advertising and sale of GHB in the United Kingdom.

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), which advises the Government on drug misuse issues, has considered the misuse of GHB on three occasions—in 1994, 1996 and in May 1998. It found that GHB could cause acute health problems particularly if taken with alcohol or other drugs. The Council concluded that GHB misuse was not widespread and did not present a sufficient social problem—the criterion for controlling substances under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971—to be brought under the 1971 Act's control.

However, as the drug could lead to acute health problems for some misusers—particularly if taken with alcohol—the Council recommended that a number of other measures should be taken. These were that the MCA should be asked to increase enforcement action against illicit manufacturers and suppliers of GHB; publishers should be asked not to carry advertisements for the drug and attempts should be made to reduce such advertising by the MCA and the Advertising Standards Authority; more targeted health education material should be made available about the adverse effects of GHB; and GHB misuse should continue to be monitored. The MCA and the Department of Health have taken action on the above recommendations; and the Home Office is continuing to monitor the position.

We understand that the World Health Organisation (WHO) is currently reviewing GHB; and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) is considering its misuse within the European Union. If the WHO or the EMCDDA recommend controls on the drug, ACMD would be asked to look at GHB again.

Child Pornography Prosecutions

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many successful prosecutions there were for the possession of child pornography in the last three years for which figures are available. [101653]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Available information, taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database, is given in the table.

Number of defendants proceeded against at magistrates courts and percentage found guilty at all courts for child pornography offences, England and Wales, 1996–98:

Take, make, distribute, show, possess with intent to distribute or show, or publish any advertisement conveying the distribution of indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs of children [1]

Year	Total proceeded against [2]	Total found guilty	
		Number	Percentage
1996	80	69	86
1997	111	103	93
1998	116	82	71

[1] Protection of Children Act 1978 sections 1 and 6 as amended by the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, section 84.
[2] = 100 per cent

Possession of an indecent photograph or pseudo-photograph of a child [1]

Year	Total proceeded against [2]	Total found guilty	
		Number	Percentage
1996	125	79	63
1997	124	81	65
1998	167	105	63

[1] Criminal Justice Act 1988 section 160 as amended by the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 sections 84(4) and 86(1).
[2] = 100 per cent

Police (Discipline Hearings)

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department at whose discretion it is for an officer facing a discipline hearing to be represented by both a Police Federation lawyer or representative and by a person from the Black Police Association. [101599]

Mr. Charles Clarke: An officer may be represented by another officer chosen by him, or he may opt to be legally represented in cases where it is judged that the punishments of reduction in rank, requirement to resign or dismissal should be available. The Police (Discipline) Regulations 1985, which cover incidents occurring before 1 April 1999, provide that in such cases the legal representative may be assisted at the hearing by a member of a police force. The Police (Conduct) Regulations 1999, for incidents after 1 April 1999, provide that in addition to having his case conducted by a legal representative the officer may be accompanied at the hearing by a member of the police force.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been applied for and granted within the Easington District Council area. [101423]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am informed that Easington District Council has made no applications for anti-social behaviour orders to date, but I am pleased to hear that they have recently established a committee to consider their use.

Gaming

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he last reviewed the working of legislation on gaming; what plans he has for further reviews; and if he will make a statement. [101427]

Mr. Straw: Much of the law on gambling is more than 30 years old. Social attitudes have changed markedly in these three decades and the law is fast being overtaken by technological developments.

The Gaming Board for Great Britain and the Deregulation Committees of the House of Commons and the House of Lords have recommended reform.

There is therefore a good case for a wide-ranging review to design a new structure of regulation for the gambling industry and to test public perception.

This will not be a simple task. The main controls are laid down in three major Acts of Parliament—the Betting, Gaming and Lotteries Act 1963, the Gaming Act 1968 and the Lotteries and Amusement Act 1976, together with associated secondary legislation. Reform will raise important issues. The social and economic impact of any change will have to be carefully assessed.

I intend to set up an independent review body next year, bringing together a wide range of relevant expertise. It will be asked to report to me within 12 months on proposals for reform.

The Government will not be asking the review body to consider changes to the National Lottery, although the review will clearly need to address the impact on the Lottery of changes proposed for the regulation of gambling generally.

We will announce the full terms of reference shortly.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Prison Service

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the Quinquennial Review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service will be launched; and if he will make a statement. [102155]

Mr. Ingram: The Northern Ireland Prison Service will have completed five years of operation as an executive agency on 31 March 2000 and, therefore, is subject, like other agencies, to a Quinquennial Review. I am announcing the review today and intend that it should be brought to completion by July 2000.

The review will be directed by a Steering Group under the Chairmanship of the Prison Service Fraser Figure and inclusive of an independent element.

The Steering Group will be supported by a Project Team led by a member of the Senior Civil Service from outside the Northern Ireland Prison Service. The leader of the Project Team will report to the Steering Group on a regular basis.

The review process will provide extensive opportunities for consultation with internal and external stakeholders and will follow the procedures recommended in the Guidance on the review of Agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies published by the Cabinet Office.

Robert Hamill

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in the inquiry by the Independent Commission for Police Complaints into the circumstances of the death of Robert Hamill; when he expects the Commission to complete its investigation; and if he will make a statement. [101855]

Mr. Ingram: The Independent Commission for Police Complaints (ICPC) have advised that on 16 January 1998 they issued a Statement expressing their view that the criminal investigation into a complaint, that police had witnessed the attack on the late Robert Hamill but had failed to intervene as promptly as possible, had been conducted to its satisfaction. This investigation was conducted under the close supervision of the ICPC by a senior CID officer of the RUC who had no connection with the Portadown district. The Northern Ireland Director of Public Prosecutions subsequently directed no criminal prosecution against any police officer involved. The ICPC is currently supervising the police investigation into the disciplinary issues relating to the complaint made and this process is at an advanced stage.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Museums and Galleries

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he will take to increase the ability of museums and galleries to make acquisitions. [101851]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* There are already several methods by which the Government enable museums and galleries to make acquisitions. Acceptance in Lieu and Private Treaty Sale schemes continue to provide owners with an incentive to offer outstanding works of art to the nation in lieu of inheritance tax. Through the Museums and Galleries Commission, the Department provides funds for the PRISM Fund (71 grants worth £292,567 in 1998–99) and the V&A Purchase Grant Fund (227 grants worth £1 million) thus assisting regional museums to acquire objects for their collections. In addition, the Heritage Lottery Fund has doubled its acquisition budget from £5 million to £10 million. It has recently supported the acquisition of Botticelli's The Virgin adoring the Christ child (£7.69 million) and has helped regional museums and galleries to acquire objects which will significantly enhance their collections, provide educational benefits, and encourage local support and interest. Under this Government, grant-in-aid to the national museums and galleries has been increased: it is for Trustees to decide their spending priorities.

School Sports

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures he has taken to promote participation in cricket in schools within the last year. [101350]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* We have been working in partnership with the England and Wales Cricket Board's Development Department and Sport England to promote participation in cricket at schools and clubs for all young people. Cricket is supported by Sport England's Active Schools initiatives, which include the Youth Sports Trust, TOP sports, the Activemark and Sportsmark award schemes, and Coaching for Teachers. In addition, Sport England provides support to governing bodies' junior development initiatives, including Kwik Cricket in primary schools. Kwik Cricket has helped boost the number of primary school pupils playing the game and, working with initiatives for older school children, has helped the number of young people playing cricket in schools and clubs, according to ECB figures, grow to 2.4 million last year. To continue to take this forward, the ECB are in consultation to help design a game specifically for secondary schools, "Intercricket", which will be launched next year. I have attended a number of cricket matches aimed at widening the support for cricket in schools.

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to increase involvement in *(a)* rugby, *(b)* football, *(c)* cricket and *(d)* hockey in schools. [101429]

Kate Hoey: Sport in schools provides the foundation for our sporting future, and contributes to the education and health of young people. All four of these sports are already supported by Sport England's Active Schools initiatives, which includes the Youth Sports Trust TOP sports, the Activemark and Sportsmark award schemes, and Coaching for Teachers. The first School Sports Co-ordinators will be appointed in September 2000, and will provide a real boost for coaching and competition in a wide range of sports, including team games. In addition, Sport England provides support to governing bodies'

junior development initiatives, including Rugby Football Union Development Officers and Kwik Cricket in primary schools.

WTO (Seattle)

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which Ministers and officials from his Department were represented at the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle. [101679]

Mr. Alan Howarth: None. However, in preparing the European Union's negotiating position for the WTO Ministerial Conference, my Department was fully involved, at both Government and Community level, to ensure that the UK's audiovisual interests were taken into account.

Carn Brea Leisure Centre

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement regarding the proposed closure of Carn Brea Leisure Centre in Cornwall. [100230]

Kate Hoey: I want to ensure that all communities have access to quality sports facilities and the opportunities to participate in sporting activities. The Government place great importance on community sports facilities such as Carn Brea, and I am therefore very concerned about its proposed closure.

The Government also place great importance on the teaching of young people to swim, and swimming remains a statutory element of the primary National Curriculum. It is vital, therefore, that the local council do everything it can to keep the facilities at Carn Brea open to the many thousands that benefit from their use.

The Chairman of Sport England and I have both written to the Chairman of Kerrier District Council making clear our concerns and urging the Council to maintain Carn Brea.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100147]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* There have been 20 Contracts let between 1 May 1997 and 30 November 1999 which contain an element of research. Details are given in the table.

Research contracts	*Value* [1] *(£)*	*(a)*	*(b)*	*(c)*
1	30,500	yes	yes	yes
2	69,500	yes	yes	no
3	320,000	yes	no	no
4	17,800	yes	no	no
5	1,375	n/a	n/a	n/a
6	20,000	n/a	n/a	n/a
7	2,100	n/a	n/a	n/a
8	78,300	yes	yes	no
9	27,500	yes	yes	no
10	270,000	yes	yes	yes
11	19,000	yes	no	no
12	15,560	yes	yes	yes
13	21,000	no	yes	no
14	9,400	yes	yes	no
15	9,800	yes	yes	yes
16	33,095	yes	yes	yes
17	12,000	yes	no	yes
18	204,250	yes	yes	no
19	133,000	yes	yes	yes
20	21,900	yes	yes	yes

[1] Value has been interpreted to mean the price of the contract

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Roger Sylvester

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Solicitor-General when the Crown Prosecution Service will make a decision on prosecutions in respect of the death of Mr. Roger Sylvester; and if he will make a statement. [101407]

The Solicitor-General: The investigation report of the Essex Police is being carefully considered by the Crown Prosecution Service in accordance with the tests set out in the Code for Crown Prosecutors. The CPS has met with the investigating officers from Essex Police and with the Police Complaints Authority to discuss the case. The CPS has requested the police to undertake additional inquiries and a further meeting with the police is arranged for later this month. The advice of Treasury Counsel will be sought. In the meantime, the CPS has kept in touch with the family's solicitors. A decision on whether or not any criminal charges should be brought will be taken as soon as possible after the evidence has been fully reviewed.

Lenient Sentences

Mr. Cox: To ask the Solicitor-General how many sentences have been referred to the Court of Appeal as unduly lenient and which have resulted in an increase in the sentences. [101604]

The Solicitor-General: In 1998, the Law Officers referred the sentences imposed on 95 offenders to the Court of Appeal for their sentences to be reviewed under the provisions of section 36 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988. Of the References that have been heard, sentences have been increased in respect of 68 offenders. Ten References were withdraw. Three References are yet to be heard.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Echelon System

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to answer parliamentary questions on the Echelon system; and if he will make a statement. [100839]

Mr. Robin Cook: As my hon. Friend is aware, it is long-standing practice not to respond to speculation on alleged intelligence operations.

Joint Environmental Markets Unit

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to implement his Department's pledge to support the DETR/DTI Joint Environmental Markets Unit on behalf of UK exporters. [101645]

Mr. Hain: The Foreign Office is providing direct support to the work of the Joint Environmental Markets (JEMU) through the training on global environment issues now offered to all staff across the Foreign Office. Support is also available through the FCO environmental programmes to enable posts to work with local governments and NGOs in promoting good environmental practice.

Exporters from all sectors also benefit from the establishment of the joint FCO/DTI British Trade International. They include those promoting UK environmental products and services as part of their company portfolio. British Trade International maintains a close liaison with sector specific bodies such as JEMU. Ministerial support for the sector was most recently evident in the JEMU trade mission to the Czech Republic from 18–19 October, led by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), and supported by British Trade International.

"The World is not Enough"

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what location fee was paid to *(a)* the British Embassy in Istanbul and *(b)* MI6 by the producers of the film, "The World is not Enough". [101648]

Mr. Robin Cook: No filming of "The World is not Enough" took place on either the premises of the British Consulate-General in Istanbul or the headquarters of the Secret Intelligence Service. The question of a location fee did not therefore arise.

Nuclear Reactors (Decommissioning)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the policy of Her Majesty's Government on the decommissioning of Soviet-designed nuclear reactors in the countries of eastern Europe as part of the negotiations relating to those countries' applications for membership of the European Union. [101890]

Mr. Hain: We strongly support G7 and EU efforts to improve nuclear safety in Central and Eastern Europe. The EU accession process provides an important opportunity to achieve early closure of reactors which cannot be upgraded to international safety standards. At the (EU) Vienna European Council in December 1998 the EU agreed to use the accession process as a lever to encourage nuclear safety and, in particular, the early closure of the oldest Soviet design reactors which safety experts assess cannot be upgraded to international standards. We fully support the Commission's efforts to persuade the applicant countries concerned—Bulgaria, Lithuania and Slovakia—to put in place credible closure plans for the relevant reactors.

We welcome the recent announcements by the Bulgarian, Lithuanian, and Slovak authorities and the commitments they contain on closure timetables for the non-upgradable reactors at respectively, the Kozloduy, Ignalina and Bohunice nuclear power plants.

We strongly support invitations for these three countries (as well as Latvia, Malta, and Romania) to open accession negotiations. We expect the Helsinki European Council on 10–11 December to decide to extend invitations to all six. Once negotiations begin, progress on nuclear safety objectives will continue to be part of the accession process as it is now.

Kosovo

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many of the *(a)* Kosovo Albanians and *(b)* Serbs reported murdered between KFOR's deployment on 12 June and mid-October are believed to be murdered by (i) Kosovo Albanians, (ii) Kosovo Serbs and (iii) others. [101415]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* There are no statistics available giving the ethnic background of the persons responsible for the reported murders of Kosovo Albanians and Serbs since KFOR's deployment on 12 June.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action KFOR is taking in Kosovo to prevent ethnic cleansing of Serbs and the destruction of their monasteries. [99857]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* Protection of the Kosovo Serbs and other minorities is a top priority for KFOR and UNMIK. KFOR devotes around half of its resources at present to maintaining a presence in minority areas. In the UK-led sector, there are KFOR soldiers present in every Serb town or village, as well as soldiers deployed to protect individual homes and farms. KFOR conducts patrols and escorts individuals to school and to work.

Protection of patrimonial sites (monasteries, cathedrals and Orthodox churches) is also a priority. In the British sector alone almost 300 troops are on permanent guard of 35 churches and other patrimonial sites.

Afghanistan

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the imposition of UN sanctions in relation to Afghanistan. [102230]

Mr. Hain: On 15 October, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1267 which demanded that the Taliban turn over Usama Bin Laden, indicted in the US for the 1998 bombings of the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, to appropriate authorities in order for him to be brought to justice and decided that, unless that demand was met by 14 November, UN member states would impose a flight ban and freeze on funds in relation to the Taliban.

The demand has not been met. The measures came into force on 14 November. A UN Sanctions Committee will be established to designate the aircraft and funds or other financial resources to which the measures will apply. Humanitarian exemptions are provided for, in respect of

both measures. The Sanctions Committee is tasked to decide on the granting of a further exemption in respect of the payment by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) to the aeronautical authority of Afghanistan on behalf of international airlines for air traffic control services.

Orders in Council under the United Nations Act 1946 came into force on 26 November to implement the measures in the UK, Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories.

EU member states have agreed to implement the Security Council resolution collectively. On 15 November, the Council of the European Union adopted a Common Position (1999/727/CFSP) concerning restrictive measures against the Taliban.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

GM Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will put measures in place to ensure that honey produced around the farm-scale trials for genetically modified crops will not contain genetically modified pollen. [99535]

Mr. Mullin: The crops in the farm-scale evaluations are being grown in the open and will be visited by bees from nearby hives. Traces of GM pollen may therefore occur in honey from such hives, although in any event honey only contains very small amounts of pollen. The Government, as advised by ACRE and the ACNFP, do not consider the presence in honey of pollen from GM crops to pose a risk to health. Therefore no special measures are being put in place to prevent bees from visiting crops.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the compensatory payments to which GM consent holders and national list maintainers may be entitled upon revocation of their consents and licences after the farm-scale evaluations. [100001]

Mr. Mullin: No estimate has been made of whether compensatory payments would be payable to GM consent holders on revocation of a consent. There are no genetically modified plant varieties on the UK National List at present, therefore the question is not relevant to national list maintainers.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the advice he has received from the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment in response to applications for marketing consent under EU Directive 90/220 for *(a)* Plant Genetics Systems oil seed rape C/BE/96/01, *(b)* LF Trifolium A/S, Monsanto Europe, SA Danisco Seed fodder beet C/DK/97/01 and *(c)* Hoechst Schering, AgrEvo GmbH oilseed rape C/DE/96/5; and when the final decision will be made by the EU. [100000]

Mr. Mullin: The advice of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) for these applications, and on all applications to release GMOs, is contained in the statutory public register held in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

A decision on whether or not to approve these products is scheduled to be taken at the next meeting of the Regulatory Committee for Directive 90/220/EEC to be held on 9 March 2000.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effect the horizontal spread of antibiotic resistant marker genes from GM crops will have on the treatment of life-threatening infectious diseases. [100165]

Mr. Mullin: Although there is little evidence that antibiotic resistant marker genes can escape from crop plants under field conditions; the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE), and the Advisory Committee for Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP), always consider the likely consequences of the horizontal spread of antibiotic resistant marker genes from genetically modified (GM) crops, were it to be possible. If horizontal gene transfer from a particular GM plant is judged to be harmful to human health or the environment, then the release would not be allowed.

The Committees consider that the use of antibiotic resistance markers should be discouraged and that their use will become unnecessary as genetic modification techniques are developed further. Their use should therefore be phased out.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the specific restrictions placed on the cultivation of GM crops. [99916]

Mr. Mullin: No GM crops may be released in England without specific approval from the Secretary of State for the Environment, acting jointly with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, or from the devolved Administrations for releases in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Each consent lists the specific limitations and conditions applying to the release. This information is available on the statutory public register held in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will explain the difference between GM farm-scale evaluations and other GM field-scale plantings. [99904]

Mr. Mullin: The farm-scale evaluations of GM crops are part of a programme designed primarily to assess the effect of the management of particular GM herbicide tolerant crops, together with the relevant herbicide, on the abundance and diversity of farmland wildlife compared with conventionally managed equivalent non-GM crops.

The evaluations are funded by Government, with the industry group SCIMAC providing and managing the crops. Proposals by SCIMAC for any other large areas or field-scale plantings of these GM crops, would be outside the farm-scale evaluation programme and will be decided by the Scientific Steering Committee, taking into account the relevance of the proposals to biodiversity. This

arrangement is part of the agreement between the Government and SCIMAC, announced in November 1999.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the locations in the UK where Class C Consent for GM crop planting has been given. [100226]

Mr. Mullin: A Part C consent for cultivation of a GM crop, issued under EU Directive 90/220, permits growing anywhere within the geographical region specified in the consent. The regulatory authorities do not have to be notified of the locations where the crop is grown.

At present three types of GM maize have Part C consents which include the UK within their scope for cultivation. However, under the recently announced voluntary agreement with SCIMAC, these crops will only be grown in accordance with the terms of that agreement.

Suicides (London Underground)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many suicides have taken place on the London Underground in each of the last 10 years. [100624]

Mr. Hill: Safety of passengers and staff on its network is the responsibility of London Underground Ltd. (LUL), which has explained that it is not possible to distinguish between fatalities on London Underground due to accidents and those where a person may have taken their own life. LUL has, however, provided in the table information on the number of fatalities arising from a person striking a train on the London Underground.

Year	*Number of fatalities*
1991	40
1992	31
1993	45
1994	39
1995	18
1996	32
1997	28
1998	25
1999 (to date)	22

Notes:
Statistics are not available for 1989, 1990, and for period between 1 January 1995 and 6 April 1995

A406 (Tree Compensation)

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the London Borough of Enfield will receive compensation for the loss of a cedar tree in Pymmes Park as part of the compulsory purchase relating to the A406; what steps he will take to ensure that the Highways Agency pays compensation; and if he will make a statement. [100821]

Mr. Hill: Compensation negotiations between the District Valuer, acting for the Highway's Agency and the London Borough of Enfield are continuing. The Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, will write to my hon. Friend with further details.

Letter from Richard Thorndike to Mr. Andrew Love, dated 8 December 1999:

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Keith Hill, has asked me to write in response to your recent written Parliament Question about compensation being claimed by the London Borough of Enfield for the loss of a mature cedar tree in Pymmes Park, as a result of works to improve the A406 North Circular Road. I am replying in the absence of Peter Nutt, the Chief Executive.

Although the tree was located very close to the highway construction area, it was intended to carry out the road works without disturbing it. Once construction started, however, because of the tree's extensive root system, it was found that it would be seriously affected. Ways of saving the tree including moving it, at an estimated cost of £100,000 were considered but none were found to be practicable. The Agency concluded that the only option was for it to be cut down. Meetings between the Agency, the District Valuer and the Council to discuss the provision of replacement trees, wider landscape proposals for Pymmes Park and compensation matters have taken place and are set to continue. The final settlement of any compensation due will depend on the outcome of these negotiations. In the event that agreement on compensation cannot be reached the Lands Tribunal is available to make an independent determination.

As part of the overall arrangements to offset disturbance, the Agency has provided exchange land at the former Willoughby Gas Works, as replacement for public open space land taken from Pymmes Park for the A406 works.

Leasehold Properties (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the number of properties in the Greater London area that are leasehold. [101042]

Mr. Mullin: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) on 10 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 610W. The estimates provided were for households rather than properties, since estimates on the latter basis are not available. It is probable that the figure for properties in London would be only slightly smaller than for households.

Departmental Research

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the titles of *(a)* research studies, *(b)* audits and *(c)* surveys (i) in progress and (ii) commissioned for completion in the next 12 months, stating in each case when the results are due to be published. [100888]

Mr. Mullin: Information about research commissioned by the Department is made widely available. It includes overview material on the DETR website and details of individual programmes and projects—again on the website and through hard copy reports, Compendia and Newsletters. Details of each project are not held centrally but a list of the Department's research projects will be prepared and placed in the Library of the House within two weeks. Other bodies sponsored by the Department, including the Highways Agency, Maritime and Coastguard Agency, English Nature, the Countryside Agency and the Environment Agency, also fund their own research programmes and publish separate information on these.

Student Housing

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the DfEE about student housing provision for university students. [101053]

Mr. Mullin: This is a matter primarily for liaison between local authorities and the universities and other higher education institutions. The DfEE, through the Higher Education Funding Councils, does not make financial provision to the universities for student residential accommodation. It is also a matter for individual students to choose the type of accommodation they wish to occupy.

My Department will continue to discuss with the DfEE whether halls of residence and other university owned, managed or leased accommodation should be exempt from our proposed licensing system for houses in multiple occupation.

We are also considering carefully Recommendation 33 of Policy Action Team 7's report on Unpopular Housing: that my Department should discuss with DfEE and the Department of Health an agreed approach to the use of existing stock to meet demand for student housing and housing for medical staff before new developments take place in areas of low demand.

HMOs

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from which local authorities about extending licensing of houses of multiple occupation. [101052]

Mr. Mullin: Manchester City Council, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council, and a number of other authorities, mainly in the north-east and north-west of England, have made a variety of proposals for extending licensing, or the power to licence, to other private rented sector housing. The Local Government Association have also suggested that future legislation should be framed to enable licensing to be extended.

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to extend licensing of houses of multiple occupation. [101051]

Mr. Mullin: We are committed to the introduction of mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). While we recognise that there are problems of poor physical and management standards elsewhere in the private rented sector, and are considering whether further measures would be appropriate to deal with these, we have no plans to extend mandatory licensing beyond the HMO sub-sector.

Crossrail

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the report recently published by the Corporation of London on Crossrail; and if he will make a statement. [101291]

Mr. Hill: Crossrail will be a matter for the new Mayor to consider in formulating an integrated transport strategy for London. Ministers will be happy to discuss the project with any new Mayor who wants to broker a viable deal to build it.

I welcome the addition to the Crossrail debate provided by the results of the Corporation of London's review of the project, and their proposals on how it might be taken forward.

Additionally, the scheme and the Corporation's report will be among the many items to be considered by Sir Alastair Morton and the shadow Strategic Rail Authority as part of their detailed study of capacity issues on the lines running out from the west of London.

Tropical Timber

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many purchases of tropical timber have been made by the Environment Agency since 1998; what were the timber species; and for what purpose they were specified. [101292]

Mr. Mullin: The Environment Agency uses timber for two main purposes, civil engineering and furniture. The Agency does not purchase any furniture containing tropical hardwood. Civil engineering works are predominately for flood defence projects. As the majority of these are contracted out, the Agency cannot readily provide figures on individual purchases of timber or other materials. Tender documentation seeks to ensure that works meet the highest environmental standards. For example, clauses are incorporated to ensure that new timber from all sources is provided from a managed renewable source. Also, the specification for groynes and piles states that

> "the timber used, including tropical hardwoods, shall be obtained from sustainably managed forests and plantations."

Further details on the Agency's procurement policies are available on the Environment Agency website.

Waste Strategy

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received regarding the Government's draft waste strategy for England and Wales, "A Way with Waste". [101317]

Mr. Mullin: The Government published for consultation their draft waste strategy for England and Wales, "A Way With Waste", on 30 June 1999. We have received over 500 substantive submissions from a wide range of interested parties, and over 20,000 postcards urging higher recycling targets from members of the public. These views will also be taken into consideration as we develop the final strategy.

The final version of our sustainable waste management strategy—which we will publish early next year—will be a long-term strategy for handling the waste generated by businesses, service providers and households. The Government are committed to introducing and promoting

sustainable waste management across the UK. This means using materials and resources efficiently, to cut down on the amount of waste we produce, and where waste is produced, dealing with it in a way that actively contributes to the economic, social and environmental goals of sustainable development.

Burscough Curves Railway Line

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with Railtrack and the train operating companies on re-opening the Burscough Curves railway line between Southport and Preston. [101160]

Mr. Hill: None. However, the sSRA is engaged in discussions with Railtrack on service improvements to be delivered during its next charging period, 2001 to 2006. Re-opening Burscough Curve has been raised for consideration by Merseytravel. The sSRA will be sending to Railtrack shortly details of improvements it wishes them to cost in their next Network Management Statement.

Homelessness

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to commission research on the provision of temporary accommodation for and the resettlement support needs of young pregnant women and single parents. [101187]

Mr. Mullin: DETR has no plans to commission such research, but the research programme for the coming year has not been finalised yet.

The Teenage Pregnancy Unit in the Department of Health, which has been set up in light of the Social Exclusion Unit's report "Teenage Pregnancy", is in the early stages of drafting its research strategy and cannot say whether it will include anything on support for teenage mothers.

Following publication of the SEU's report, the Housing Corporation has invited bids from Registered Social Landlords to develop around 15 pilots to test alternative approaches to the provision of supported accommodation for 16–18 year old lone parents. Research, in the form of evaluation of both the pilots and existing projects providing supervised accommodation, will be initiated once the pilots are established.

Footpaths

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many adjudications on the closure or diversion of footpaths he was called upon to make for each relevant authority in the last year for which figures are available; and in how many of these cases the local authority's view was overturned. [101152]

Mr. Mullin: The number of decisions made by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on the closure and diversion of footpaths for each relevant authority between the periods 1 November 1998 and 31 October 1999 are as follows:

Order making authority	*Number of closures/ diversions*	*Number of orders not confirmed*[1]
Ashford Borough Council	3	0
Babergh District Council	2	0
Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council	1	0
Bath and North East Somerset Council	1	0
Bedfordshire County Council	5	0
Bolsover District Council	1	0
Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council	1	1
Broxbourne Borough Council	2	2
Buckingham County Council	1	0
Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council	1	0
Cambridgeshire County Council	3	0
Cherwell District Council	1	0
Chichester District Council	1	0
Cornwall County Council	4	2
Cumbria County Council	2	0
Darlington County Council	6	0
Derbyshire County Council	1	0
Devon County Council	4	2
Durham County Council	2	0
East Cambridgeshire District Council	1	0
East Northants District Council	1	0
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	1	0
Epping Forest District Council	1	1
Gloucestershire County Council	1	1
Hampshire County Council	1	0
Harborough District Council	1	0
High Peak Borough Council	1	1
Kent County Council	6	0
Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council	1	0
Lake District Special Planning Board	4	0
Leeds City Council	2	2
Lincoln City Council	2	2
London Borough of Bromley	1	1
London Borough of Hillingham	1	0
London Borough of Newham	2	1
Manchester City Council	1	0
Mendip District Council	1	1
Mid-Bedfordshire District Council	2	1
Mid-Suffolk District Council	1	0
North East Derbyshire District Council	3	2
North Norfolk District Council	1	1
North Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council	4	0
North Yorkshire County Council	8	1
Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council	2	1
Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council	2	1
Oxfordshire County Council	1	0
Pendle Borough Council	1	0
Plymouth City Council	1	0
Portsmouth District Council	1	1
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council	1	0
Reigate and Banstead Borough Council	1	0
Rossendale Borough Council	1	0
Rotherham Borough Council	1	0
Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead	1	0
Runnymede Borough Council	1	0
Sedgemoor District Council	1	0
Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council	1	0
Shropshire County Council	3	1
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	2	1
South Bedfordshire District Council	3	3
South Cambridgeshire District Council	1	0
South Gloucestershire Council	1	0
South Kesteven District Council	2	1
South Norfolk District Council	2	1
South Northants District Council	3	0
South Somerset District Council	2	0
St. Edmundsbury Borough Council	2	0
Staffordshire Moorlands District Council	1	1
Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council	1	1
Stroud District Council	1	0
Surrey County Council	4	1
Swale Borough Council	1	0
Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council	1	0
Taunton Deane Borough Council	2	0
The Wrekin District Council	1	0

Order making authority	Number of closures/ diversions	Number of orders not confirmed [1]
Tonbridge and Malling District Council	1	0
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	1	0
Wakefield Metropolitan District Council	1	1
Warwick District Council	1	0
Warwickshire County Council	5	0
Watford Borough Council	1	0
Wealden District Council	1	1
West Dorset District Council	2	2
West Wiltshire District Council	1	0
Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council	1	0
Wiltshire County Council	2	1
Worcester City Council	1	0
Worcestershire County Council	2	0
Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority	1	0
Total	160	40

[1] Includes orders which where substantially modified before confirmation

Local Government

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the smallest district council area which will be covered by the proposed cabinet structure for local government. [101284]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Local Government Bill, which was read a Second time in the other place on 6 December, includes provision for all district councils, including Watford Borough Council which has the smallest area among such councils, to adopt new constitutions including a separate executive.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his proposed timetable is for the introduction of cabinet government into district councils. [101286]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Subject to Parliament enacting the Local Government Bill, all councils will be required to put forward proposals for new constitutions, including their proposed timetable for implementation. As our White Paper "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People" (Cm 4014) made clear, should there be any cases where progress is not being made, it will be open to the Secretary of State to use his reserve power to intervene.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what exemptions he proposes from the planned cabinet government structure for district councils; and whether the criteria for exemption will include *(a)* size of district, *(b)* population and *(c)* number of councils. [101285]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Local Government Bill provides that all district councils shall have a duty to bring forward proposals to move to one of the new forms of constitution involving a separate executive.

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice he has given local authorities which wish to introduce new local government structures before the Local Government Bill is enacted. [101978]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In March, we published the paper "Local leadership, local choice" (Cm 4298), which set out proposals for more efficient, transparent and accountable constitutions for councils and which included a checklist of steps that councils could take before legislation. The paper made clear that any new structure a council adopted should be what its local people wanted and therefore the council must consult its local community widely on all available options before making any change.

Central Trains

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions the Health and Safety Executive has investigated the Central Trains service between Shrewsbury and Birmingham; and if he will make a statement. [101161]

Mr. Hill: The Health and Safety Executive's Railway Inspectorate (HMRI) carries out routine inspection of the activities carried out by Central Trains. This includes the services between Shrewsbury and Birmingham, but HMRI has no record of specific inspections of these services.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to ensure that areas of outstanding natural beauty receive central support for their management and conservation. [101208]

Mr. Mullin: The Government have provided the Countryside Agency with an additional £2.5 million this year to be spent on the management and conservation of designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). That more than doubles the amount previously available. We expect to announce shortly a number of further measures to assist in the conservation and management of AONBs.

Landscape Policy Guidance

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with the Landscape Institute concerning the possible introduction of landscape policy guidance notes; and if he will make a statement. [101209]

Mr. Mullin: Ministers and officials have various contacts with the Landscape Institute. My hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for housing, planning and construction attended the Landscape Institute awards on 18 November and on 25 November DETR officials met representatives of the Landscape Institute to discuss a number of points of common interest. I am not aware of any discussions concerning the possible introduction of landscape policy guidance notes, although the Institute has advised its intention to update its Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

Railtrack (Trespass)

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what recent guidance he has given to Railtrack regarding trespass on railway lines; [101325]

(2) what his policy is on the action Railtrack should take following a trespass on Railtrack property that caused severe disruption to passenger trains. [101326]

Mr. Hill: As an infrastructure controller, Railtrack is required under the Railway Safety (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 1997 to take reasonably practicable steps to prevent unauthorised access to its infrastructure. Breaches of this duty are enforced by the Health and Safety Executive's Railway Inspectorate.

The Health and Safety Commission's Railway Industry Advisory Committee (RIAC), of which Railtrack is a member, has been active in promoting industry-wide action against trespass and vandalism. In December last year RIAC produced a booklet "Prevention of Trespass and Vandalism on Railways—A Good Practice Guide" (a copy of which is in the House Library).

The action to be taken following severe disruption to train services following acts of trespass is an operational matter for Railtrack and the train operating companies. However, it is expected that their aim would be to restore normal services as quickly as possible.

Secure Station Status

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the stations which have been awarded Secure Station status. [101496]

Mr. Hill: As at 2 December, there were 28 stations accredited under the Secure Stations Scheme. They are as follows:

Train operator	*Station*
Chiltern Railways	Marylebone rail
Connex Rail	Belvedere Hither Green
Eurostar (UK)	Ashford International Waterloo International
LTS Rail	Basildon Fenchurch Street
London Underground Ltd.	Marylebone LUL
Midland Mainline	Derby Leicester Market Harborough
Railtrack plc	Charing Cross rail Glasgow Central High Level Kings Cross rail Manchester Piccadilly Victoria rail
Silverlink Trains	Kew Gardens
South West Trains	Kingston Richmond
Thameslink Rail	City Thameslink Haydons Road Morden South South Merton St. Helier Sutton Common Wimbledon Chase
Wales and West	Gloucester Weston-super-Mare

A number of other stations are working towards accreditation.

Concessionary Fares

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received about the concessionary fares scheme in Merseyside; and if he will make a statement. [101693]

Mr. Hill: I have not received any representations about the concessionary fares scheme on Merseyside.

Council Tenants (Freehold)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the freehold system as it applies to council tenants purchasing their council flat. [101603]

Mr. Mullin: When council tenants buy their flat, they buy a long lease, not the freehold. Leaseholders have the right to purchase the freehold of their block in certain cases. However, the right can only be exercised by a majority of residents. As most council blocks are occupied mainly by secure tenants, rather than leaseholders, many cannot meet this requirement.

The Government last year announced proposals to reform the leasehold system and to introduce commonhold. Commonhold will allow flats to be owned absolutely, but there will be rules to regulate the relations between flat owners to enable proper management of the block as a whole. Leasehold reform will, among other things, make it easier for leaseholders to buy a share of the freehold of their block. However, the right will still require a majority to exercise it.

The Government have taken a number of steps to help those who have bought a council flat, including allowing—and in some cases requiring—landlords to reduce high charges, and giving council and other leaseholders an easier way to challenge unreasonable charges.

Water Companies (Maintenance Services)

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy on water companies contracting out their network maintenance services. [101432]

Mr. Mullin: Water undertakers are required to carry out their duties consistent with Sections 37 and 38 of the Water Industry Act 1991. Sewerage undertakers have similar responsibilities under Sections 94 and 95 of the Act. It is for the relevant companies to consider how best to meet these obligations.

The Director General of Water Services publishes an annual "Report on levels of service for the water industry in England and Wales", a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order 1999

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what response

he has made to the Court of Appeal decision to allow judicial review of the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order 1999. [101642]

Mr. Mullin: The Secretary of State has appointed Counsel to defend the Government's position at the Court of Appeal hearing on 8 and 9 December. We believe that the Order is within the scope and purpose of the enabling power under section 31 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 and that the Secretary of State did not act unreasonably in deciding to make the Order.

Housing Corporation

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions the Housing Corporation has approved a contractual purchase sale on terms better than the statutory terms. [101451]

Mr. Mullin: The Housing Corporation is required under section 9 of the Housing Act 1996 to approve all disposals of properties by Registered Social Landlords. Where the disposals are to tenants of the properties it is the Housing Corporation's policy not to allow disposals on terms better than the statutory terms.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance Ministers have given to the Housing Corporation relating to approval of contractual purchase sales on terms better than the statutory terms. [101450]

Mr. Mullin: My Department has not issued guidance to the Housing Corporation relating to the approval of contractual purchase sales, known as "voluntary sales", on terms better than the statutory terms. The Corporation's consent is required under section 9 of the Housing Act 1996 to disposals and I understand that it is the policy of the Corporation not to grant consents in the case of voluntary sales to tenants on terms which exceed those under the Right to Buy scheme.

Renewal Area Status

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the benefits of introducing renewal area status for self-contained groups of fewer than 300 dwellings. [101413]

Mr. Mullin: My Department is currently considering a number of issues relating to policy on private sector housing renewal, which includes policy on renewal areas. The housing Green Paper, which will be published shortly, will provide an opportunity for us to set out our thinking on these and other housing issues.

Open Countryside (Mapping)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the mapping of open countryside in England and Wales to be completed; and if the exercise is being carried out in stages according to the nature of the terrain. [101483]

Mr. Mullin: The Countryside Agency and Countryside Council for Wales will be responsible for producing maps showing land to which the new statutory right of access will apply. They are currently undertaking preliminary work, the results of which will help determine the best approach to mapping, and enable a timetable to be established for the production of consultation maps.

Audits

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will undertake a comparison between the audit process for small parish councils and those for *(a)* charities and *(b)* businesses of similar financial size. [101488]

Ms Beverley Hughes: As recognised by statute, the audit processes for local authorities, including parish councils, are not comparable with those of the private sector or charitable bodies, reflecting that authorities largely obtain their funds through taxation.

Parking

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy to exempt parking places at *(a)* police premises and *(b)* prisons from workplace parking charges. [101837]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* The Transport Bill currently before Parliament allows the Secretary of State or the National Assembly for Wales to require workplace parking levy schemes to include exemptions for particular types of premises. Local authorities will also be able to include their own exemptions. Our consultation paper "Breaking the Logjam" sought views on a range of possible exemptions. A detailed response to the consultation exercise will be published in due course.

Factortane

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library the Skeletons of Argument for the Crown in R *v.* Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and Regions ex parte Factortane *(a)* in the Court of Appeal and *(b)* in the House of Lords. [101137]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

A skeleton argument is drafted by Counsel in the course of litigation for the assistance of the court, or as appropriate in the House of Lords. In the present case the Government have no objection to placing copies of these skeleton arguments in the Library and this has now been done.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received in the last six months on the performance of the Meat Hygiene Service. [99291]

Ms Quin: In the last six months, my Department has received several hundred representations from Members of Parliament, Members of the European Parliament, industry organisations, individual meat plant operators, farmers, consumers and others about the performance of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS), and in particular the

extent of veterinary supervision in meat plants, and about proposals to increase MHS inspection charges. Representations have also been made about the need to use fully qualified veterinarians by the MHS.

The Government have listened to these concerns about the future of the slaughtering sector. Following fresh advice obtained from the European Commission, published on 13 October, low throughput slaughterhouses will not be required to have full-time supervision by a vet during post-mortem inspection. The MHS is now reviewing its levels of inspections in individual low throughput premises. Moreover, as the Minister announced on 1 December, the MHS hygiene inspection charges for the whole of 1999–2000 are being held at the levels set for 1998–99. The Government have also given a commitment that the rates of MHS hygiene inspection charges in 2000–01 should not rise by more than the rate of inflation above the levels charged in 1999–2000.

Land Prices

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the freehold sale price by English region of grade 1 agricultural land for the most recent year for which figures are available. [100579]

Ms Quin: The average prices of freehold sales of agricultural properties are shown in the following table.

Average price of Grade 1 agricultural land sold in 1998, by English region

Government Office region	*£000 per hectare*
North East	[1]—
North West	8.1
Yorkshire and Humberside	8.5
East Midlands	6.0
West Midlands	[1]—
Eastern	7.0
South East	7.3
South West	7.1
England	6.9

[1] Denotes insufficient sales to give an average price

The average prices in most cases are based on a very low number of actual sales and hence are not a reliable indicator of regional differences. As details are reported up to three years after the sale date, these estimates are provisional.

Farming (Leicestershire)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate the total value to Leicestershire farmers of all CAP payments for *(a)* the last year for which figures are available and *(b)* 2000–01. [101061]

Ms Quin: The following schedule shows approved payments to Leicestershire farmers for both the 1998 calendar year and the 1998–99 financial year. Farmers in Leicestershire will also have benefited from CAP schemes supporting market prices which do not involve payments made directly to them.

Regarding estimates for 2000–01, with so many variables it is not possible to provide estimates with any degree of accuracy at this time.

CAP Payments in Leicestershire

£

Scheme	*Calendar Year 1998*	*Financial Year 1998–99*
Sheep Annual Premium Scheme	2,489,961	2,406,632
Suckler Cow Premium Scheme	2,454,053	2,210,637
Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance	—	—
Beef Special Premium Scheme	4,352,833	4,331,827
Arable Areas Payments Scheme	28,210,375	28,013,534
Environmentally Sensitive Area	—	—
Organic Aid Scheme	11,350	14,158
Farm Woodland Scheme	34,407	34,407
Farm Woodland Premium Scheme	110,469	117,145
Nitrate Sensitive Areas	—	—
Countryside Stewardship Scheme	364,188	402,471

Note:

The figures are based on the addresses to which payments have been made which in the majority of cases will be the address where the relevant farming activities have taken place. However, when a single farm business operates on land in various locations, the payment is made to their main holding rather than, in all cases, the holding where the cropping or livestock maintenance may necessarily have taken place. This means that an element of the payments shown will relate to farming activities in other parts of the UK but the payments will have been made to the main holding address in Leicestershire. Conversely, the figures attached will not include payments for farming activities in Leicestershire in cases where the main holding is located in another part of the UK.

All schemes have individual 'scheme years' and these, invariably, respect neither calendar nor financial year boundaries. The figures quoted give totals of all payments made under the schemes, which will cover a mixture of scheme years. For example, in the case of BSPS, they will be made up from the balance payments for the 1997 scheme year, paid in April 1998 and the Advance payments for the 1998 scheme year, paid in November 1998.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Mr. Brake: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the total amount of agri-environment or general agricultural support expended, in the most recent period for which figures are available, on SSSI land in England; and if he will break down the figure in different types of expenditures. [101290]

Mr. Morley: In 1998–99 total payments in respect of SSSI land under the Environmentally Sensitive Areas scheme amounted to £6.4 million. Figures are not available in the form requested for the other agri-environment schemes or for general agricultural support.

Correspondence

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk will receive a reply to her letter of 25 November on arable area payments. [101859]

Mr. Nick Brown: I assume the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk is referring to her letter of 25 October to which I replied on 3 December.

DEFENCE

Project Aquatrine

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the status of Project Aquatrine. [102324]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Project Aquatrine will provide, for the first time, strategic management of water and sewerage services across more than 3,000 Ministry of Defence sites in Great Britain. The Department aims to achieve this through a Public Private Partnership (PPP) and has today launched a market consultation paper to explore private sector interest in the project. The PPP will lead to greater value for money, investment in the defence infrastructure and enable responsibility for the provision of water and sewerage services to rest with those best able to deal with it while meeting the Department's on-going environmental responsibilities.

The market consultation follows successful pathfinder projects at Tidworth and Lyneham; the outcome will inform the decision on the next phase of the project.

The current plan is to advertise Project Aquatrine in the *Official Journal of the European Communities* in early 2000, leading to the selection of a partner to begin providing services in late 2003. The project has a potential value of £1 billion over 25 years.

RAF Helicopters

Mr. Martin Bell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the incidents of uncommanded flying control movements in helicopters reported by RAF pilots, broken down by helicopter type since 1994. [101652]

Mr. Spellar: Uncommanded movements are defined as unusual movement of flying controls or rotors that are not caused by pilot inputs. These include those unusual movements found during pre-flight checks.

The table lists the incidents of uncommanded flying control movements in helicopters reported by RAF pilots, broken down by helicopter type since 1994.

Uncommanded flying control movements

Year	*Occurrences*
Chinook	
1994	6
1995	5
1996	6
1997	5
1998	7
1999	6
Total	35
Gazelle	
1994	1
1995	1
Total	2
Griffin	
1997	2
1998	3
1999	1
Total	6
Puma	
1994	8
1995	9
1996	3
1997	2
1998	4
1999	6
Total	32
Sea King	
1994	8
1995	10
1996	6
1997	5
1998	3
1999	3
Total	35
Wessex	
1994	17
1995	10
1996	15
1997	5
1998	6
1999	3
Total	56
Helicopter Total	166

Falklands

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the number of land mines in the Falkland Islands. [101822]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle) to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Crausby) on 30 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 159W.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what role he proposes following the 22 UK/French Summit for Anglo-French co-ordination in relation to the UK commitment to the defence of the Falkland Islands. [R] [101420]

Mr. Hoon: None. The security of the Falkland Islands is the responsibility of the United Kingdom Government alone.

Land Mines

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps his Department is taking to ensure that foreign military forces stationed in the United Kingdom do not store land mines in the United Kingdom. [98594]

Mr. Spellar: The UK is fully committed to the Ottawa Convention which prohibits the use, stockpiling, production, and transfer of anti-personnel mines (APMs). The last of the UK's operational stocks of APMs were destroyed on 19 October 1999—three years ahead of the timeframe laid down in the Convention. Allies who have forces stationed in the UK are well aware of the Ottawa Convention's obligations which include the prohibition of

the stockpiling of APMs on UK territory. The only APMs stored in the UK are the small amount (some 4,000) that the UK's armed forces hold for training and testing in de-mining techniques, as permitted under Article 3 of the Ottawa Convention.

Royal Army Medical Corps

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the recruitment campaign for the Royal Army Medical Corps; and if he will make a statement. [100722]

Mr. Spellar: The Royal Army Medical Corps undertakes recruiting on a continuous basis, utilising a wide variety of media and the Army Recruiting network. Recruitment into training is good, but it is more difficult to attract already qualified medical personnel. The tri-Service campaign in February and March 1999 aimed at the direct recruitment of qualified personnel has resulted, to date, in one doctor and four nurses entering the Army, with a further six nurses in the recruitment process. Additionally, a major recruiting campaign for the Territorial Army Medical Services was launched in September 1999. It is too early to predict the success of this campaign but early responses seem promising.

AWE Aldermaston

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the longest amount of overtime worked by any MOD police officer at AWE Aldermaston in any period of *(a)* two weeks, *(b)* one month and *(c)* six months, since November 1998. [100684]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* The largest number of overtime hours worked by a MOD Police officer at AWE Aldermaston during a one-month period since November 1998 was 120 hours and a six-month period was 532 hours. The MDP do not routinely record overtime worked in two-week periods and this information could only be provided by manually searching through all the individual police pay records at AWE Aldermaston, incurring disproportionate cost.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received from the Defence Police Federation in respect of overtime worked by officers at AWE Aldermaston. [100687]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* I understand that concerns have been expressed by the local Defence Police Federation at AWE Aldermaston about the levels of overtime worked at that location.

Deceased Aircrew

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the occasions since 1993 in which deceased aircrew have been found guilty of gross negligence in accidents involving military aircraft which were not fitted with cockpit voice recorders or flight data recorders. [101497]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested is as follows:

Date	*Aircraft type*	*Service*	*Location*
2 June 1994	Chinook HC2	RAF	Mull of Kintyre, Scotland

Non-core Service Privatisation

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many non-core services have been privatised by his Department in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* each of the previous three years. [101661]

Mr. Spellar: Individual budget areas and agencies routinely contract out services to the private sector where this offers best value for money. No central records of such arrangements are kept. Relevant figures for activities contracted out under the former Competing for Quality (CFQ) initiative and for contracts concluded under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) are:

	PFI	*CFQ*
1995–96	2	8
1996–97	8	16
1997–98	6	5
1998–99	9	5

HMS Glasgow

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the current crew levels are of HMS Glasgow. [101298]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* On 1 December 1999 HMS Glasgow had a crew level of 23 Officers and 224 ratings.

Navy Vessels

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which naval vessels have been withdrawn in advance of planned exercises during 1999. [101613]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Invincible, HMS Northumberland, HMS Ledbury, HMS Gloucester, HMS Newcastle, HMS Cattistock, HMS Montrose, HMS Monmouth, HMS Fearless, HMS Ocean, HMS Sandown, HMS Edinburgh, HMS Westminster, HMS Grafton have been withdrawn from planned exercises this year.

Devolved Assemblies (Defence Briefings)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what charging arrangements are in place in respect of the budgets of the Scottish Executive and National Assembly for Wales, to pay for the time of Ministry of Defence officials preparing briefing for members of the *(a)* Scottish Executive and *(b)* National Assembly for Wales when replying to debates. [101150]

Mr. Hoon: Members of the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly of Wales are entitled to ask for and receive any information which would be relevant to the running of their business. The same principles apply to information that the Ministry of Defence might require from the devolved Administrations. As this relationship includes an exchange of information both ways, there are no charging arrangements in place in respect of the budgets of the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly of Wales to pay for the time of Ministry of Defence officials preparing this briefing.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence to what security level members of the Scottish Executive are briefed on defence matters when answering debates on defence issues in the Scottish Parliament. [101149]

Mr. Hoon: Members of the Scottish Executive are provided with all information that is necessary and appropriate to enable them to meet their responsibilities to the Scottish Parliament. As Scottish Ministers are Ministers of the Crown and members of the Scottish Executive remain Civil Servants, no additional security restrictions apply.

Service Pensions

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the current rate is of service pension that would be paid to an Army major who retired at the age of *(a)* 55 after 34 years reckonable service on 1 April 1977, *(b)* 53 after 32 years reckonable service on 1 April 1975 and *(c)* 55 after 34 years reckonable service on 1 April 1997. [101151]

Mr. Spellar: *(a)* The current rate of service pension that would be paid to an Army major who retired at the age of 55 after 34 years reckonable service on 1 April 1977 is £12,776.18.

(b) The current rate of service pension that would be paid to an Army major who retired at the age of 53 after 32 years reckonable service on 1 April 1975 is £16,131.20.

(c) The current rate of service pension that would be paid to an Army major who retired at the age of 55 after 34 years reckonable service on 1 April 1997 is £19,233.

HEALTH

HIV/AIDS

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what Government funding is available for HIV and AIDS research; and how this is distributed between the NHS regions. [99388]

Yvette Cooper: Estimated total Government funding for HIV/AIDS research in 1999–2000 will be £16 million, of which £10 million will be spent by the Medical Research Council. The rest of the funding will be split between the Public Health Laboratory Service, the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research, the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control, other research councils and Government Departments. Funding is not allocated across National Health Service regions, but is awarded to the research centre best able to undertake high quality work.

Project details of work directly funded by the Department or supported through the NHS research and development levy can be found on the National Research Register. This is available in the Library and most medical libraries on CD-Rom, and on the internet: http://www.doh.gov.uk/nrr.htm.

NICE

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the compliance of current arrangements for appeals against recommendations of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence with the requirements of Article 2, paragraph 2 of the EC Council Directive of 21 December 1988. [99880]

Mr. Denham: Article 2 of the EC Council Directive of 21 December 1988 (the "Transparency Directive") refers to arrangements for the approval of the price of medicinal products. That has no relevance to the work of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, which has no role in relation to pricing issues.

Departmental Estate

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the value of land and property including properties under construction *(a)* in Scotland, *(b)* in England and *(c)* in total for his core Department, including leasehold and freehold properties, and the regional offices. [99737]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The value of the National Health Service estate in England, including properties under construction, is approximately £23 billion. The valuation of freehold land and property in England occupied by the Department, including its regional offices, is being developed as part of the implementation of resource accounting. This information is currently being audited. The first set of resource accounts will be published in respect of 1999–2000.

Issues relating to Scotland are a matter for my right hon. Friend the First Minister for Scotland.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the value of land and property in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* England and *(c)* total held by non-NHS bodies within his responsibility. [99735]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The total value of the National Health Service estate in England is approximately £23 billion. In addition, an amount of £75 million is directly attributable to non NHS bodies.

Issues relating to Scotland are a matter for my right hon. Friend the First Minister for Scotland.

Health Authority Mergers

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many health authority mergers have occurred since May 1997. [100779]

Mr. Denham: Nationally there has only been one health authority merger since May 1997 when North West Anglia, East Norfolk and Cambridge and Huntingdon Health Authorities merged to become Norfolk and Cambridge Health Authorities on 1 April 1999.

Hospital and Community NHS Trust Mergers

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the hospital and community NHS trust mergers that have occurred since May 1997. [100778]

Mr. Denham: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Shropshire Health Authority

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many emergency admissions *(a)* to the Royal

Shrewsbury Hospital and *(b)* in total for Shropshire Health Authority there were in each year from 1992 to date; and if he will make a statement. [100723]

Ms Stuart: The table shows the number of emergency admissions *(a)* to the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital National Health Service Trust and *(b)* to NHS trusts within Shropshire Health Authority for the financial years 1992–93 to 1997–98.

Ordinary admissions and day cases combined: number of emergency admissions shown by selected health authority and hospital provider, NHS hospitals, England

	Shropshire HA	*Royal Shrewsbury Hospital NHS Trust*[1]
1992–93	23,262	12,143
1993–94	29,705	15,192
1994–95	29,882	15,088
1995–96	33,210	17,448
1996–97	33,860	17,005
1997–98[2]	34,794	17,261

[1] Figures for 1992–93 and 1993–94 are for the Royal Shrewsbury Acute Unit and Shrewsbury Acute Hospital Unit respectively
[2] Figures for 1997–98 are provisional, no adjustments have yet been made for shortfalls in data (ie the date is ungrossed)
Source:
Department of Health, Hospital Episode Statistics (HES)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the full patient satisfaction survey results for *(a)* Shropshire Health Authority and *(b)* all the NHS trusts in Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [100594]

Ms Stuart: The report of the first part of the national surveys programme—on general practitioner services—was placed in the Library in October ("National Surveys of NHS Patients: General Practice 1998"). A breakdown of the data to health authority level can be found on the internet at: http://doh.gov.uk/public/nhssurvey.htm.

The second part of the programme—on coronary heart disease—will include data at National Health Service trust level and will be published in 2000.

NHS Beds (Winter)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those NHS trusts that are planning to cope with winter bed pressures by contracting with the private medical sector. [100574]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not available centrally.

Diabetic Care

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when pen needles for use by diabetics will be available on prescription. [100918]

Ms Stuart: We have consulted on proposals which would include allowing insulin pen needles to be prescribed by general practitioners on the National Health Service. We have received representations from most of the organisations consulted. We are considering them and are seeking clarification on certain points before we make our final decisions.

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the development of diabetic care on the NHS. [101368]

Mr. Denham: My noble Friend Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, is announcing today the membership of the Expert Reference Group which will advise my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health on the development of the National Service Framework for diabetes. The Group met for the first time today. It is co-chaired by Professor Mike Pringle, Chair of the Council of the Royal College of General Practitioners, and Mr. Peter Houghton, Regional Director of the Eastern Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive.

Membership of the Expert Reference Group is as follows:

Professor George Alberti, President of the Royal College of Physicians

Mr. Zac Arif, Chief Executive of Teddington Memorial Hospital

Ms Debbie Bamford, Chief Executive of Woking Primary Care Group

Dr. Peter Betts, Paediatrician from Southampton General Infirmary

Mr. Ian Donnachie, Chief Executive of Bradford Health Authority

Dr. Azhar Farooqui, General Practitioner and Primary Care Group Clinical Governance Lead, Leicester

Dr. Owain Gibby, Diabetologist, Royal Gwent Hospital

Dr. Trisha Greenhalgh, General Practitioner, London

Ms Geeta Patel, a user of diabetes services and mother of triplets, Wolverhampton

Dr. Veena Soni Raleigh, Epidemiologist and Researcher, National Institute of Epidemiology

Mr. John Rostill, Chief Executive, Walsall Hospitals NHS Trust

Mr. Paul Streets, Chief Executive, British Diabetic Association

Ms Sheridan Waldron, Dietitian, Leicester

Ms Rosemary Walker, Diabetes Specialist Nurse, Suffolk and Chair, Royal College of Nursing Diabetes Nursing Forum

Professor Rhys Williams, Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health, Nuffield Institute for Health, Leeds

Dr. Bob Young, Diabetologist, Hope Hospital, Salford.

Another user of diabetes services will be brought on to the Group early in the New Year.

The scope of the diabetes National Service Framework covers prevention, ascertainment, identification, management and complications of Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes and the management of diabetes in pregnancy.

The diabetes National Service Framework will be published in 2001. It will set national quality standards and service models for diabetes, and presents an opportunity to define practical, implementable and sustainable standards for the delivery of care, focused on the needs of people with diabetes. It will help us to reduce

unacceptable variations in care, while improving the overall quality of services. The diabetes National Service Framework will pay particular heed to the needs of those who are disproportionately affected by diabetes, such as people from ethnic minority communities.

General Medical Council

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will take steps to increase awareness among the public of the General Medical Council's responsibility for doctors working in private practice. [101339]

Ms Stuart: The Medical Act 1983 provides for the regulation by the General Medical Council of the medical profession in the United Kingdom irrespective of whether practice is undertaken in the National Health Service or privately.

The General Medical Council has made it clear in its publication "A Problem With Your Doctor?" that its powers cover doctors

"in all branches of medicine, including hospital and general practice, whether in the NHS or in private practice".

Crohn's Disease

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the availability of Infliximab for prescription on the NHS for the treatment of Crohn's disease. [101322]

Mr. Denham: A European licence was granted on 13 August 1999 for Remicade, whose active constituent is infliximab, for certain indications. These are: for the treatment of severe, active Crohn's disease in patients who have not responded despite a full and adequate course of therapy with a corticosteroid and/or an immunosuppressant; and for the treatment of fistulising Crohn's disease in patients who have not responded despite a full and adequate course of therapy with conventional treatment.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100150]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* Information about individual research contracts could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Details of medical and related research funded or supported by the Department can be found in the National Research Register. This is available in the Library and in most medical libraries on CD Rom, and on the internet: http://www.doh.gov.uk/nrr.htm.

Copies of model contracts for the Department's Policy Research Programme and the National Health Service research and development programme are in the Library.

The Department actively encourage publication of research it has funded.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Weights and Measures Act 1985

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will make a statement on the reasons for the proposed removal of the statutory qualification from the Weights and Measures Act 1985; [100450]

(2) what consultations his Department has held with *(a)* business and *(b)* consumers' groups in respect of the proposed removal of the statutory qualification from the Weights and Measures Act 1985; [100451]

(3) what assessment he has made of the impact on *(a)* consumers and *(b)* business of the proposed removal of the statutory qualification from the Weights and Measures Act 1985; [100452]

(4) what plans he has to replace the statutory qualification in the Weights and Measures Act 1985. [100449]

Mr. Byers: As part of the Government's new consumer strategy as set out in the recent White Paper "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers", we have been consulting on the basis of the document "Fair Trade: a consultation document on modernising the law on the sale of goods sold by quantity" on proposals to update and simplify weights and measures law. This includes how the law is enforced.

The consultation document proposed removal of the requirement in the Act for weights and measures inspectors to have a special certificate from the Department of Trade and Industry. Instead, either a general requirement would be placed on local authorities to ensure that those carrying out enforcement functions under the Act had appropriate training, skills and knowledge, paying regard to guidance on training and qualifications in a Code of Practice; or, alternatively I would have power to approve particular qualifications for particular purposes. These proposals have been brought forward as part of a broader examination of consumer protection enforcement (as described in the White Paper), in the light of the range of duties and responsibilities for enforcement in this area.

Both the White Paper and the consultation document referred to were widely distributed to both business and consumer organisations, as well as to enforcement authorities. We have received a number of replies, which are currently being considered. Further consultation is envisage before any final decisions are made.

Ice-cream Industry

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will make a statement on the arrangements for notification and publication of the Government's response to interested parties on the Competition Commission's inquiry into the ice-cream industry; [100408]

(2) when his Department will publish its response to the Competition Commission's report into the ice-cream industry; [100409]

(3) what plans he has to shorten the consideration period for departmental responses to Competition Commission reports; [100410]

(4) how many representations his Department has received on the Competition Commission's inquiry into the ice-cream industry. [100407]

Mr. Byers: The Competition Commission report on impulse ice cream will be published as soon as practicable. The Department's normal administrative target for publication of monopoly reports is within 10 weeks of receipt of the report.

The Department has received a number of representations in connection with the Competition Commission's investigation of the impulse ice cream market. Those received before the report was delivered to me were forwarded to the Competition Commission. Those received after the report was delivered to me will be taken into account by me at the appropriate time as part of my consideration of the report.

Copies of the report will be laid before Parliament at the same time as it is published. Immediately after publication, interested parties who have requested it will be sent a copy of the Press Notice announcing my decision.

Petrol Prices

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received regarding petrol prices charged to customers by car hire companies. [101134]

Mr. Byers: I have received no such representations.

British Gas

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to ensure that British Gas LP Gas is accountable to the Gas Consumer Council. [101164]

Mrs. Liddell: The Gas Act 1986 defines gas by reference to substances which are in a gaseous state and does not deal with liquid petroleum gas (LPG) unless it is in a gaseous state when ownership is transferred to the consumer. As a body set up under the Gas Act 1986, the Gas Consumers' Council therefore has no functions in respect of companies' LPG activities. The Government have no plans for change in this respect.

As consumers have done in the past, problems concerning the pricing and supply of LPG, should continue to be referred to their local Trading Standards Department. The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) is responsible for consumer protection and competition issues covering the LPG industry including issues of pricing, supply and delivery and has powers under the Fair Trading Act 1973 to investigate anti-competitive behaviour such as collusive or predatory pricing. Consumers will continue to be able to bring this to the attention of the Director General of Fair Trading.

Dental Whiteners

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he is taking to stop the practice of hairdressers administering dental whiteners illegally. [101190]

Mr. Byers: We are not aware of this practice of hairdressers supplying dental whiteners. However, if a hairdresser supplies to consumers dental whitening products which are contrary to the Cosmetics Regulations, then this act of supply would be prohibited under those Regulations regardless of the use the whiteners may be put to.

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action the Government are taking to secure a revocation of the EU Directive on dental whiteners; and if he will make a statement. [101192]

Mr. Byers: There is no EU Directive on dental whiteners. These are controlled under the Cosmetics Directive. A review of the provisions of the Cosmetics Directive as they apply to tooth whiteners is currently under way.

Business Competitiveness (EU)

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with other members of the European Union on improving the competitiveness of business. [101198]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department's EU priorities, and in particular the central objective of improving the working of the single market, are aimed at improving the competitiveness of EU industry. DTI ministerial colleagues and I have regular discussions with our EU opposite numbers on a wide range of issues in both bilateral meetings and at EU Council meetings in Brussels.

The process of encouraging the EU to concentrate on competitiveness issues was reinforced at EU level at the Cardiff European Council under the UK Presidency last year which laid down a process to encourage and monitor economic reform and competitiveness in Europe.

In March next year, the Portuguese Presidency will be holding a special European Council on economic reform, employment and social cohesion. The UK has made a substantial input to this discussion, with the knowledge-driven economy, enterprise and social inclusion as our main proposals for achieving the objective of making Europe the most advanced knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. My colleagues and I have spoken to a large number of our counterparts in other member states on these themes.

Vehicle Restraint Systems

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce new regulations for the automotive industry relating to the handling and disposal of redundant secondary restraint systems on vehicles. [101498]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has published guidance on the handling, storage, transport and disposal of vehicle air-bags and seat-belt pre-tensioners (ISBN 07176 15987). In addition the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders recommends that such items should not be re-used after removal from vehicles, a recommendation endorsed by the HSE. Although the Government currently have no plans to introduce legislation banning re-use we will keep this under close review.

Energy Prices

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what has been the average decrease per household in the price of *(a)* electricity and *(b)* gas since privatisation expressed in (i) cash and (ii) percentage terms. [101499]

Mrs. Liddell: *(a)* Average annual domestic electricity bills are estimated to have fallen by £59 in real terms (at 1999 prices) between 1990 and 1999, representing a fall of 18 per cent.

(b) Average annual domestic gas bills are estimated to have fallen by £138 in real terms (at 1999 prices) between 1986 and 1999, representing a fall of 31 per cent.

More detailed figures relating to average annual domestic electricity and gas bills are presented in the tables.

Average domestic annual standard electricity bill [1]

	1990 [2] *(£)*	*1993* [3] *(£)*	*Change (£)*	*Percentage change*
Real terms[4]	324	265	59 decrease	18 decrease
Cash terms	245	265	19 increase	8 increase

[1] Average UK domestic electricity bill (including VAT) for customers on Standard Credit terms consuming 3,300 kWh. The majority of customers are on these payment terms. Other payment methods currently available are direct debit, and pre-payment.

[2] Privatisation of the electricity supply industry for the domestic market took place in 1990.

[3] 1999 figures are provisional estimates.

[4] Real 1999 terms calculated using the GDP (market prices) deflator. The 1999 deflator is estimated based on data for the first three quarters.

Average domestic annual standard gas bill [1]

	1986 [2] *(£)*	*1993* [3] *(£)*	*Change (£)*	*Percentage change*
Real terms[4]	443	305	138 decrease	31 decrease
Cash terms	261	305	56 increase	17 increase

[1] Average GB domestic gas bill (including VAT) for customers on Standard Credit terms consuming 18,000 kWh. The majority of customers are on these payment terms. Other payment methods currently available are direct debit, and pre-payment.

[2] Privatisation of the gas supply industry for the domestic market took place in 1986.

[3] 1999 figures are provisional estimates.

[4] Real 1999 terms calculated using the GDP (market prices) deflator. The 1999 deflator is estimated based on data for the first three quarters.

Fuel Prices

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what impact the change in the price of fuel since privatisation has had *(a)* on the retail prices index and *(b)* on the amount of money paid in state benefits. [101500]

Mrs. Liddell: *(a)* The retail prices index (RPI) produced by the Office for National Statistics consists of a variety of components, each covering different products, including fuels. These components are aggregated using weights, which change each year, to produce the overall RPI. Over the period from 1987 to 1998 the fuel and light component of the all items RPI has increased more slowly than the all items RPI. The available information is presented in the table:

	All items RPI January 1987=100 [1]	*Fuel and light component January 1987=100* [1]	*Weight given to fuel and light component in the all items RPI parts per 1000*
1987	101.9	99.1	61
1988	106.9	101.6	55
1989	115.2	107.3	54
1990	126.1	115.9	50
1991	133.5	125.1	46
1992	138.5	127.8	47
1993	140.7	126.2	46
1994	144.1	131.7	45
1995	149.1	134.5	45
1996	152.7	134.8	43
1997	157.5	130.6	41
1998	162.9	125.0	36

[1] Annual average

Note:
Figures for years prior to 1987 are based on January 1974=100

(b) Most social security benefits are uprated in April each year normally by reference to the retail prices index for the year up to the preceding September. The Rossi index, excluding changes in housing costs, is used in the case of most income-related benefits. Increases in fuel costs will have contributed to those inflation indices and will therefore have played a part in determining changes in benefit levels, but no benefit payments relate directly to the price of fuel.

Coal Concessions

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement concerning origins of future supplies of concessionary coal to retired mineworkers. [101425]

Mrs. Liddell: Concessionary coal includes a variety of manufactured smokeless fuels, housecoal, and anthracite. Under the current contracts most fuel has been UK sourced. Supplies beyond March 2000 are the subject of a competitive tender, which I am still assessing. I hope that the UK suppliers will continue to make their products available to the distributors appointed by the Department, and that the products they offer are competitive in terms of both prices and quality.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria he will adopt to award the contract for the supply and distribution of concessionary coal to former British coal miners. [101216]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* As notified in the *Official Journal of the European Communities*, the award criteria for contracts for the supply and distribution of concessionary fuel are the economically most advantageous bids in terms of price, security of supply and quality maintenance standards.

Utilities (Operating Profits)

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the operating profit to-date of each *(a)* regional water authority, *(b)* regional electricity authority and *(c)* regional gas authority. [101430]

Mrs. Liddell: The water industry falls within the responsibilities of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. Figures for the electricity industry are published in the annual report of the Office of Electricity Regulation which is available in the Library of the House. Figures for the gas industry are published in the Annual Report and Accounts of British Gas, subsequently Centrica and BGplc.

Parcelforce

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what policy changes he is planning as a result of the reported half-year loss by Parcelforce. [101731]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The half-year loss reported by Parcelforce is a matter of commercial and financial policy for Parcelforce management. It represents a 6 per cent. reduction in loss compared to the equivalent period to September 1998. Further improved operational efficiency from measures, such as the new express and international hubs at Coventry coming on-stream, are expected to make a positive contribution to the financial position of Parcelforce.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he is implementing to ensure the half-year loss by Parcelforce does not constitute a hidden subsidy; and if he will make a statement on his assessment of the effect this loss will have on competitors. [101805]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Parcelforce operates in a competitive area and is continuing to improve its competitiveness and profitability, as shown by its improved financial performance. The Post Office is required to take steps to make sure there is no undue cross-subsidy between Royal Mail monopoly services and Parcelforce. These include the separation of accounts and, in accordance with normal practice, a requirement that the in-year funding requirement to Parcelforce from Post Office Group is charged at a commercial rate.

In future the new, independent regulator, the Postal Services Commission, will ensure that any cross-subsidy from the monopoly areas to competitive activities is the minimum required, in its opinion, to ensure the continued provision of services required by the Universal Service Obligation at a uniform public tariff (which includes the standard parcels service). The Postal Services Commission will also ensure fair competition.

Airbus Project

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effect of the United Kingdom's participation in the military company's airbus A400M project on employment in the UK. [101656]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Future Transport Aircraft (FTA) competition is being run by the Ministry of Defence. The A400M, along with Boeing's C-17 and Lockheed Martin's C130J, is a contender in the competition. The Department of Trade and Industry is involved in the consideration of the industrial implications of this procurement. Our assessment looks at the possible impacts of each bid on the UK's industrial and technological capabilities. The impact on UK employment levels is one aspect of this.

The FTA competition is still at the competitive bidding stage and it would be inappropriate to publish information provided to both MOD and DTI by companies as part of this process.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100157]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* This information would be available only at disproportionate cost.

Developing Countries

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list by country *(a)* the amount recovered by the Export Credits Guarantee Department and *(b)* the amount repaid under aid loans, for each of the countries defined by the World Bank as developing countries, in each of the last two financial years. [101414]

Mr. Caborn: From the information available, Table 1 shows the value of debts recovered by the Exports Credits Guarantee Department and Table 2 shows the amount repaid under aid loans. Both Annexes refer to countries defined by the World Bank as developing nations and include amounts from the last two financial years.

Table 1: Amounts recovered by ECGD, by financial year

	1997–98	*1998–99*
Highly Indebted Poor countries		
Angola	—	—
Burkina Faso	0.068	0.08
Burundi	—	—
Cameroon	1.834	2.915
Central African Republic	—	—
Congo	0.22	—
Congo (Dr)	0.9	—
Cote d'Ivoire	0.72	3.845
Ethiopia	0.44	0.563
Ghana	3.848	1.518
Guinea	0.168	0.154
Guinea Bissau	0.128	—
Guyana	5.079	3.498
Haiti	0.425	—
Honduras	—	—
Liberia	—	—
Madagascar	0.373	0.446
Malawi	0.613	0.842
Mali	0.275	0.263
Mauritania	0.609	0.322
Mozambique	0.963	—
Myanmar	—	—
Nicaragua	0.103	0.039
Niger	0.048	0.103
Nigeria	1.704	8.195
Rwanda	—	—
Sao Tome	—	—
Sierra Leone	—	—
Somalia	—	—
Sudan	—	—
Tanzania	3.992	9.731

Table 1: Amounts recovered by ECGD, by financial year

	1997–98	*1998–99*
Uganda	0.773	—
Vietnam	0.772	0.85
Yemen Rep	4.574	3.49
Zambia	1.84	2.01
Moderately Indebted Low Income countries		
Bangladesh	—	—
Benin	0.187	0.216
Cambodia	—	—
Chad	—	—
Comoras	—	—
Gambia	0.101	—
India	0.709	0.466
Kenya	9.219	11.589
Lao PDR	—	—
Pakistan	0.114	—
Senegal	0.059	0.02
Togo	0.517	0.161
Zimbabwe	0.025	0.273
Severely Indebted Middle Income countries		
Argentina	23.035	21.099
Bolivia	1.175	1.065
Brazil	144.246	107.702
Bulgaria	1.647	4.427
Cuba	—	—
Ecuador	1.997	—
Gabon	14.804	1.561
Indonesia	0.498	1.639
Iraq	0.084	0.05
Jamaica	0.685	0.723
Jordan	24.174	17.194
Peru	9.172	9.619
Syrian Arab Republic	6.226	0.266
Moderately Indebted Middle Income countries		
Algeria	10.889	14.559
Chile	—	—
Colombia	—	—
Georgia	—	—
Hungary	—	—
Macedonia	0.645	0.805
Malaysia	—	—
Mexico	41.479	45.45
Morocco	17.949	10.373
Panama	—	—
Philippines	10.49	5.103
St. Vincent	—	—
Thailand	—	—
Tunisia	—	—
Turkey	—	—
Uruguay	—	—
Venezuela	6.198	0.177
Severely Indebted Low Income countries		
Afghanistan	—	—
Burundi	—	—
Laos	—	—

Table 2: Amounts repaid under aid loans

	1997–98	*1998–99*
Afghanistan	—	—
Antigua and Barbuda[1]	—	—
Bangladesh	—	—
Barbados	19,350.00	19,360.00
Belize	—	—
Botswana	—	—
Brazil	382,536.14	254,466.07
Cameroon	—	—
Caymen Islands[2]	62,760.00	64,560.00

Table 2: Amounts repaid under aid loans

	1997–98	*1998–99*
Columbia	218,342.91	51,774.45
Costa Rica	554,572.96	373,437.30
Cyprus	20,400.00	20,400.00
Dominica	270,500.00	—
Ecuador	338,500.00	366,833.91
Egypt	—	—
Ethiopia	—	—
Gambia	—	—
Ghana	—	—
Grenada	375,200.00	—
Guyana	—	—
Honduras	—	—
India	13,499,527.55	7,747,819.00
Indonesia	—	—
Ivory Coast	—	—
Jamaica	3,862,234.10	—
Jordan	—	—
Laos	—	—
Malawi	—	—
Malaysia	516,200.00	516,200.00
Mauritius	404,009.15	191,850.00
Mozambique[3]	—	—
Nicaragua	—	—
Nigeria	—	—
Pakistan	—	—
Paraguay	234,600.00	234,600.00
Peru	—	—
Philippines	738,019.54	561,166.36
Senegal	—	—
Seychelles	—	—
Sierra Leone	—	—
Solomon Islands[4]	—	—
Sri Lanka	—	—
St. Kitts	—	—
St. Lucia	—	—
St. Vincent	—	263,200.00
Sudan	—	—
Swaziland	831,801.48	381,270.90
Tonga	65,600.00	—
Tunisia	26,660.72	—
Turkey	3,368,301.54	3,368,301.54
TCI	82,563.97	—
Zambia	—	—
W. Somoa	—	—
Zimbabwe	1,458,640.00	1,229,420.00
Total Bilateral	27,330,320.06	15,644,679.53

[1] 1991
[2] 1975/1
[3] 1976
[4] 1981

Minimum Wage

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people have phoned the minimum wage hotline. [101481]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Since the introduction of the National Minimum Wage (NMW) on 1 April 1999 the helpline run by the Inland Revenue on behalf of the Department of Trade and Industry has received some 95,000 calls. In addition, the NMW helpline arranged through the Central Office of Information took 50,000 inquiries in January to March 1999. The total number of calls received by NMW helplines is therefore over 145,000.

Oil Fabrication (Scotland)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the future of oil fabrication in the Highlands and Islands. [101436]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* I am concerned at the situation faced by Barmac and the other UK offshore oil fabrication yards.

The difficulties facing the UK offshore oil fabrication industry were discussed fully at last week's Oil and Gas Industry Task Force, which I chair. As a result plans are already under way for DTI to co-ordinate and support a powerful group comprising Government, Scottish Executive and all of the relevant Departments and agencies throughout the UK. This group will meet as soon as possible to clarify how they can together best help the industry adapt to the changed demand for their products and solutions.

Car Mileage (Customer Protection)

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the adequacy of existing legislation for protecting customers against being sold cars for which the mileage has been altered. [100812]

Dr. Howells: Selling a car with a false mileage reading is an offence under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968. The key is to ensure that the enforcement authorities and buyers have access to reliable information on the history of a vehicle and my Department has been working with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) on ways to improve this.

As a result the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency are currently considering proposals to make available more information on mileage by introducing a mandatory requirement for mileage to be recorded on vehicle registration and licensing forms. In addition, the computerisation of the MOT testing system by DETR will provide another central source of mileage information on vehicles more than three years old. For newer cars, the Government support the car retail industry's scheme for centrally recording data collected when vehicles are services.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Debt

8. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the recent moves in the US Congress to grant $110 million to fund bilateral debt forgiveness. [100355]

24. **Mr. Tom Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the response by the US Government to Her Majesty's Government's initiatives on the current debt crisis. [100371]

Clare Short: The US Congress decision to provide resources for US export credit debt relief is welcome, as are its agreement to the IMF's financing of its debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. However, the agreement on revaluing gold covered only the first tranche. The American pledge to cancel 100 per cent. of its bilateral debts for qualifying HIPCs will only be implemented after these countries have received their HIPC relief. It was therefore very disappointing that the US contribution for the HIPC Trust Fund was not agreed. This means that a substantial financing gap has opened up and this has stalled progress on implementing the revised HIPC initiative. I welcome the US Administration's commitment to pursue a US contribution to the Trust Fund next year.

20. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to reduce the debt burden of the poorest countries. [100367]

Clare Short: My Department has been working closely with the Treasury on the problem of unpayable debt. Our Government have played a leading role in seeking a permanent solution to the debt problems of the poorest countries. We successfully pressed for a comprehensive Review of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative last year. Proposals for revising the HIPC framework were agreed in September 1999 at the Annual Meetings of the World Bank and the IMF. The HIPC initiative will now provide twice as much debt relief, and it will be provided more quickly and to more countries. There is also a much stronger link to poverty, to ensure that the poor benefit from the debt relief provided.

My Department has cancelled nearly all the aid debts of the poorest countries, worth around £1.2 billion since 1978, and we provide all our aid on grant terms, so as not to add to the burden of debt. We announced in 1997 that we are willing to cancel the aid debts of the remaining poor Commonwealth countries who are committed to poverty reduction and the international development targets, who are pursuing sound economic policies, who are committed to transparent and accountable government, and who are bearing down on corruption.

My Department also supports capacity building in debt management so that countries can better understand their debt position, negotiate their debt relief and formulate future borrowing strategies.

EU Aid Policies

9. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to ensure that EU aid policies concentrate more on poverty eradication and development. [100356]

Clare Short: EC development assistance is ineffective and insufficiently focused on poverty. We are working to ensure the EC's development effort embraces international poverty eradication targets. We published a strategy at the end of last year with 18 detailed proposals for reform.

Angola

10. **Mr. White:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the situation in Angola; and if she will make a statement. [100357]

Clare Short: The situation in Angola is grim. Some 3.7 million people are affected by the war. Many are facing serious malnutrition. The continuing insecurity remains a major obstacle to aid reaching some in greatest need. A lasting peace is the only answer. We have committed about £7.5 million in humanitarian assistance this year.

Population Programmes

11. **Mr. Ottaway:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on funding of population programmes. [100358]

Clare Short: We are spending £80 million through our own programmes on reproductive health care. This is a doubling of our programmes since 1994. We also spend £5.4 million through NGO's. Over the past 30 years we have moved from 9 per cent. to nearly 60 per cent. of couples having access to modern contraception. The International Community is committed to reaching 100 per cent. by 2015.

World Development Report

12. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the World Bank's world development report 1999–2000, "Entering the 21st Century"; and if she will make a statement. [100359]

Clare Short: This year's World Development Report deals with two great trends—globalisation and localisation. I welcome its message that we need new rules and institutional responses. The poor benefit from rule-based systems: otherwise they can be trampled on and bullied by the most powerful. The WTO for example provides an opportunity to developing countries to achieve a fairer trading system. And international agreement is needed to tackle global environmental problems.

The 1999 Report covers many issues. I am particularly looking forward to next year's Report on Poverty. I have every hope it will be pathbreaking.

Zambia (AIDS)

13. **Mr. Fabian Hamilton:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to help Zambia to find a solution to its AIDS epidemic. [100360]

Clare Short: AIDS is one of the four priority areas for our new Country Strategy in Zambia. We are already working in key areas of AIDS prevention, control and treatment.

World Trade Organisation

14. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the World Trade Organisation talks in Seattle in so far as they affect Britain's relations with developing countries. [100361]

15. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what role her Department is playing in determining Government policy in respect of the World Trade Organisation. [100362]

16. **Mr. Alan Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the WTO Seattle meeting, and its potential impact on poverty reduction, self-sufficiency and sustainability in the developing world. [100363]

25. **Mr. Tyler:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the impact of the WTO Round in Seattle on the economies of developing countries. [100372]

27. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the effect of the WTO Seattle Round on developing nations. [100374]

Clare Short: I refer my hon. Friends and the hon. Members to the answer I gave this afternoon to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham).

Balkans

17. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to maintain and expand assistance for the development and reconstruction of civil society and political structures in *(a)* Kosovo, *(b)* Macedonia and *(c)* Montenegro. [100364]

Clare Short: As part of our strategy to move from emergency and humanitarian support in Kosovo to longer-term assistance, we plan to assist with elections planned for next year (including arrangements for civil registration), promote the protection of civil and political rights and encourage the development of local civil society.

In Macedonia, we are planning to strengthen the capacity of government and civil society to design and deliver effective social policies. We are currently supporting citizen's advice and information services.

In Montenegro, we are exploring ways to build the capacity of civil society.

28. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if, when she last met her colleagues from other member states of the European Union, they discussed matters relating to the funding of aid projects in Kosovo and Serbia. [100375]

Clare Short: I have not discussed the funding of aid projects in Kosovo and Serbia with EU colleagues recently. However, there are regular meetings at official level.

Most recently the second donors' conference for Kosovo held in Brussels on 17 November pledged over $1 billion towards a programme of reconstruction and recovery. On Serbia, our position and that of the European Union is that, as long as Milosevic remains in power, we are only prepared to provide humanitarian assistance.

Volunteers

18. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the contribution of post-school overseas volunteers to developing countries. [100365]

Clare Short: My Department does not support schemes or organisations which fund school leavers to do volunteer work in developing countries, where the principal aim is the self development of the volunteer rather than developmental impact.

Over the last 20 years the main volunteer sending agencies have themselves phased out sending school leavers overseas, instead focusing on experienced and professional people who can have an impact on sustainable development. However, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) have recently introduced a new programme "Millennium World Youth" in partnership with The Prince's Trust. This is a new approach to volunteering for younger people, focusing on helping develop and challenge youth approaches to issues such as racism.

My Department does support the Overseas Training Programme, run by VSO. This initiative aims to send young people overseas, who are close to obtaining a professional qualification, have a particular expertise to offer, and can have a role to play in development. This scheme is due to be reviewed next year.

Windward Islands

19. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to help the people of the Windward islands. [100366]

Clare Short: Our office in the Caribbean is currently finalising a three year strategy paper for the Windward Islands which will take forward and focus our development assistance in areas where we can best help to reduce poverty. The strategy anticipates total DFID funding of £3m per year for the four islands in support of further work in education, the environment, economic reform, social policy, particularly focusing on poverty reduction strategies and public sector reform.

Zimbabwe

21. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the future of the aid programme to Zimbabwe. [100368]

Clare Short: The Government of Zimbabwe's policies are not focused on reducing poverty and this seriously limits our ability to work in Zimbabwe.

This means we are working to low case scenario set out in a Country Strategy Paper, published in April 1999. Copies are available in the Library of the House.

Women (Economic Empowerment)

22. **Mr. Geraint Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to provide greater economic empowerment of women in the developing world. [100369]

Clare Short: Women bear the brunt of poverty, but they also hold the key to its eradication. We are strongly committed to getting more girls through school, and working for improved opportunities for women.

We are supporting numerous projects and programmes which are seeking to make credit available to poor women, to provide them with non-financial support to starting and building small and medium enterprises, and removing obstacles to women's access to land and other assets. Our work in support of women has been the subject of a recent inquiry by the International Development Committee of this House, and it has just published an informative report on the work we are doing in this area.

Kenya

23. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what financial support the Government are giving to Kenya. [100370]

Clare Short: UK bilateral development assistance to Kenya for 1999–2000 is expected to be £24 million.

Mongolia

26. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plan she has to visit projects funded by her Department in Mongolia. [100373]

Clare Short: I have no plans to visit Mongolia.

AIDS Vaccine

29. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the work of her Department to support the development of an AIDS vaccine for use in the developing world. [100376]

Clare Short: We are providing £14 million over the next five years to the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI) to help develop an AIDS vaccine which is safe, effective and affordable for developing countries. This is additional to our earlier grant of £200,000 made in 1998, and supplements our existing work with the UK Medical Research Council and the European Commission.

Malaria

30. **Mr. Kirkwood:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with the World Health Organisation regarding the increased incidence of malaria; and if she will make a statement. [100377]

Clare Short: My Department has regular and frequent discussions with the World Health Organisation. Most recently, we have completed arrangements for making available £48 million over the next four years to the Roll Back Malaria initiative. £7 million of this allocation has already been provided for work this year.

Belize

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the development benefit to Belize of its investment in the hydro-electric power project in 1994–95. [101744]

Clare Short: None. Responsibility for assessing the development value of its investments rests with CDC's board.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if the Commonwealth Development Corporation's investment in the Belize hydro-electric project in 1994–95 meets the criteria for

investment currently in operation; and what value for money assessment her Department has made of the project. [101738]

Clare Short: The investment in Belize Electricity Company was made according to conventional project financing criteria, fully meeting CDC's criteria at the time. These took into account the internal rate of return, the continuing capacity of the business to service the debt, and an analysis of key risk factors. CDC is now moving away from senior debt into equity investment.

Responsibility for assessing the value for money of individual investments rests with CDC's board. DFID's interest is not at project level but in the performance of CDC in meeting overall agreed targets.

My Department has not carried out a value for money assessment of the project.

Commonwealth Development Corporation

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what was the average *(a)* interest charge per year levied by the Commonwealth Development Corporation and *(b)* bank rate per year over the period 1990 to 1997. [101742]

Clare Short: Since 1993 CDC's policy has been to fix its interest rate with reference to a base rate kept in line with the London Inter-Bank Offer Rate (LIBOR), plus a margin ranging from 1 per cent. to 5 per cent. reflecting the credit quality of the borrower and incorporating as assessment of market and project risk.

In the period concerned the rate of interest that CDC was charging on its long-term senior debt was in line with that charged by other development finance institutions such as the International Finance Corporation (IFC), and was not subsidised.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what was the average value of investments made by the Commonwealth Development Corporation in each of the years 1990 to 1997. [101740]

Clare Short: The value of CDC's average individual investments in each of the years 1990 to 1997 was as follows:

	£ million
1991	3.6
1992	3.7
1993	3.9
1994	3.8
1995	3.8
1996	4.0
1997	4.0

The figures for 1990 are not immediately available.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what are the benefits to recipients, other than favourable treatment for interest rates, of loans provided by the Commonwealth Development Corporation which cannot be provided by commercial borrowing. [101745]

Clare Short: In many markets where CDC operates, long-term loans are not available to businesses for reasons of perceived credit risk. CDC loans therefore enable businesses to access long-term senior debt which may not otherwise be available to them.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what was the largest investment made by the Commonwealth Development Corporation in the years 1990 to 1997. [101741]

Clare Short: The largest investment made by CDC between 1990–97 was £38.3 million in the Housing Development and Finance Company in India.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development in which hydro-electric projects the Commonwealth Development Corporation invested from 1990 to 1997. [101743]

Clare Short: Between 1990 and 1997 CDC made investments in three hydro-electric projects. These were: the Hidroelectrica Planatar SA in Costa Rica, the Kapichira Hydro Electric Scheme in Malawi and the Belize Electricity Company Ltd.

Montenegro

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is her estimate of the amount of financial assistance required from the international community to stabilise the economy of Montenegro. [101462]

Clare Short: We have not made such estimates. The response of the international community to Montenegro's needs will be made in the light of the policies pursued by the Montenegrin Government and on the basis of discussion with them. We are closely following developments.

SCOTLAND

Lynebank Hospital

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on what date his Department announced *(a)* the closure of Lynebank Hospital and *(b)* the sell-off of the site; and if he will make a statement. [99244]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* I understand that no ministerial announcement has been made. The health service in Scotland is now a devolved matter for the Scottish Executive.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 December. [101416]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further such meetings later today.

TREASURY

Savings Target

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his targets are in respect of the level of the savings ratio in the United Kingdom. [101830]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government are aiming to spread the saving habit more widely and provide the right economic conditions to promote long-term saving.

Pesticides

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the reduction of pesticides use is an aim of his proposal for a pesticides tax; and if he will make a statement. [101817]

Mr. Timms: I refer the right hon. Member to paragraphs 6.106 to 6.108 inclusive of the Pre-Budget Report (Cm 4479), published on 9 November.

Individual Savings Accounts

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many new regular savers have been attracted by the ISA scheme. [101815]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) on 11 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 764W.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of savers who hold both a maxi-ISA and a mini-ISA. [101827]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) on 27 October 1999, *Official Report,* column 898W.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Tynan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate in respect of South Lancashire Council area *(a)* the numbers of income support and jobseeker's allowance claimants going onto the working families tax credits scheme because of the greater financial incentives involved and *(b)* the number of people in work who will now be entitled to working families tax credits as a result of more generous conditions of entitlement. [101487]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates for the numbers in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit in South Lanarkshire are not yet available.

Employment

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the increase in the number employed in Shrewsbury and Atcham since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [101714]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 7 December 1999:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to respond to your recent parliamentary question on the number of people employed in Shrewsbury and Atcham. I am replying in Dr Holt's absence.

The most robust estimates at local authority level relate to jobs rather than numbers employed. These figures are available on an annual basis at September each year. In September 1997, the Annual Employment Survey (AES) shows that there were 39,000 employee jobs in the Shrewsbury and Atcham local authority district. This compares with 38,300 for September 1996. Information for September 1998 from the AES will be available in the next few months.

Direct estimates of the numbers of people who are in employment and living in Shrewsbury and Atcham can be derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Figures from this source cover employees, self-employed, unpaid family workers, and those on government employment training programmes, but are subject to larger sampling errors at local authority district level. For 1997–98, our best estimate on this basis is 47,000 which is the same as 1996–97.

European Court of Justice

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects a decision from the European Court of Justice on the VAT treatment of road tolls and road pricing; who initiated the proceedings in the court; and for what reasons. [101704]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* The Advocate General will deliver his written opinion to the European Court of Justice on 27 January 2000. If the Court follows its normal timetable the decision should be given three to six months later. Proceedings were initiated against the United Kingdom and five other member states by the European Commission. The dispute is over the interpretation of VAT legislation.

VAT

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the revenue raised by VAT in the *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 1997–98 tax years; and what assessment he has made of the effect of simplifying the application of VAT between different retail sectors. [101905]

Dawn Primarolo: Revenue raised by VAT in 1996–97 was, £46,657 million. In 1997–98 it was, £50,865 million.

There are no simplifications for which an assessment by retail sector has been performed.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal (Heywood and Middleton)

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many lone parents aged *(a)* under 18, *(b)* 18–34, (c)34–50, and (d) over 50 years have joined the New Deal since 1998 (i) nationally and (ii) in the constituency of Heywood and Middleton. [100294]

Ms Jowell: The following table shows, by age, the number of lone parents attending an initial New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) interview in the period since the full national roll-out of the NDLP programme, that is from 26 October 1998 to the end of August 1999.

Age of lone parent	Great Britain	Heywood and Middleton
Under 18	580	1
18–24	17,200	52
25–34	38,120	94
35–49	27,650	51
50+	1,200	2

Departmental Estate

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his estimate is of the value of land and property *(a)* in Scotland, *(b)* in the United Kingdom, *(c)* overseas and *(d)* in total held by (i) Ofsted, (ii) the Equal Opportunities Commission, (iii) the Funding Agency for Schools, (iv) the FEFC, (v) HEFCE, (vi) Investors in People UK Ltd, (vii) the National Council for Education Technology Ltd, (viii) Remploy Ltd, (ix) the Student Loans Company, (x) the Teacher Training Agency, (xi) the Construction Industry Training Board, (xii) the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board and (xiii) the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority; and what is the value of other assets held by each of these bodies. [99842]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The information relating to the value of land, property and other asses is drawn from the latest set of accounts for each of the following organisations.

£

	Land and property	Other assets
Ofsted		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	560,282	0
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	560,282	0
Equal Opportunities Commission		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	0	460,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	0	460,000
Funding Agency for Schools		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	0	1,151,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	0	1,151,000
FEFC		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	1,276,000	28,500,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	1,276,000	28,500,000
HEFCE		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	0	50,610,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	0	50,610,000
Investors in People UK Ltd.		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	0	957,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	0	957,000

£

	Land and property	Other assets
National Council for Education Technology (NCET) Ltd.		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	204,000	1,832,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	204,000	1,832,000
Remploy		
(a) Scotland	1,714,000	1,061,000
(b) United Kingdom	24,388,000	22,341,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	26,102,000	23,402,000
Students Loan Company		
(a) Scotland	1,015,000	2,213,000
(b) United Kingdom	0	0
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	1,015,000	2,213,000
Teacher Training Agency		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	240,000	3,188,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	240,000	3,188,000
Construction Industry Training Board		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	4,681,000	28,517,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	4,681,000	28,517,000
Engineering Construction Industry Training Board		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	555,000	7,509,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	555,000	[1] 7,509,000
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority		
(a) Scotland	0	0
(b) United Kingdom	2,440,000	5,577,000
(c) Overseas	0	0
Total	2,440,000	5,577,000

[1] Excludes £7,763,000 investments

Child Care

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many extra child care places for *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire he estimates will be created under the expenditure announced in the Chancellor's Pre-Budget Report; and if he will make a statement. [101140]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has announced that expenditure to assist further education students with child care costs will increase from £5 million this year to £21 million in 2000–01. These amounts add to the approximately £4 million a year which is already provided by the Further Education Funding Council. This increase includes the additional funding referred to by the Chancellor in his Pre-Budget Report. It is expected that in 2001–02 we will assist about 37,000 students. The funding will be made a ring-fenced element within the Further Education Access Fund and will be allocated to colleges through a formula which takes account of student numbers and widening participation factors. Colleges will be told of their allocation by March 2000.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which local education authorities currently include a special educational needs factor in their LMS formula based on a local SEN audit; and what are the comparative value of funds allocated for pupils through such a factor according to the stage in the code of practice they have reached, for each LEA for which information is available. [101835]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Teachers' Pay

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what process was used to allocate the contract for consultancy work on teachers' performance-related pay; and what criteria were used to select the successful contractor. [101396]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* In May, Hay McBer was awarded a contract to carry out research into the characteristics of effective teachers. Hay was uniquely placed to carry out this work because of its research and development associated with the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers.

SSA (Leicestershire)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what additional standard spending assessment for Leicestershire would be required if it was funded at the average for English counties for *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary pupils based on the provisional standard spending assessment for 2000–01. [101444]

Ms Estelle Morris: The SSA primary education sub-block would need to increase by £6,629,130 and the secondary education sub-block by £6,403,760 in order for Leicestershire to be funded at the English counties' average.

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the estimated standard spending assessment funding is for *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary pupils for Leicestershire local education authority based on the provisional education standard spending assessment for 2000–01. [101443]

Ms Estelle Morris: In Leicestershire for 2000–01 the provisional standard spending assessment for the primary education sub-block is £99.99 million, and for the secondary education sub-block is £103.63 million.

SSA Formula

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he last met the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to discuss the current standard spending assessment funding formula. [101445]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meets Cabinet colleagues regularly to discuss a range of issues including the standard spending assessment funding formula.

Educational SSA

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average standard spending assessment funding is per *(a)* primary pupil and *(b)* secondary pupil for English counties based on the provisional educational standard spending assessment for 2000–01. [101441]

Ms Estelle Morris: The provisional average standard spending assessment is £2,348 per primary pupil and £3,024 per secondary pupil for English counties for 2000–01.

SEN Tribunal

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the 1998–99 annual report from the President of the SEN tribunal will be published. [101954]

Jacqui Smith: The report was published yesterday and copies have been placed in the Library.

I would like to thank all those working with the Tribunal—the President, the members and the secretariat staff for their hard work and commitment over the past year. I am delighted that the Tribunal has maintained its targets for dealing with appeals while also handling an increased volume of such appeals.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people had their jobseeker's allowance stopped after an interview with job centre staff in each month of *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [101469]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, dated 8 December 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked me to reply to your question about how many jobseekers have had their Jobseeker's Allowance stopped following interviews with Jobcentre staff. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

You will recall that I replied to you, along very similar lines, in my letter of 11 March. In that reply I said that the Employment Service conducts many different types of interviews with jobseekers, starting at the new claims stage and developing as unemployment lengthens. The new jobseeker's interview is important in establishing whether jobseekers meet the labour market conditions for receiving Jobseeker's Allowance and it is normally at this stage that a Jobseeker's Agreement is drawn up and jobseekers are made aware of their responsibilities in order to receive Jobseeker's Allowance. Thereafter, entitlement to the Allowance is reviewed at fortnightly interviews. We also use these opportunities to offer jobseekers further advice and help in their search for work. Jobseekers are also asked to attend a Restart interview at regular six monthly intervals at which they are offered further advice and information about employment and training opportunities. Beyond this, interviews may take place for a variety of other reasons.

Questions about a jobseeker's entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance could arise at any of the interviews referred to above. In these instances there may be a reference to a Sector Decision Maker (formerly an Adjudication Officer) for a decision on benefit entitlement.

Statistics on the number and types of decisions given by Employment Service Decision Makers on labour market questions are recorded in a quarterly summary—the 'Analysis of Sector Decision Making' (formerly known as the 'Analysis of Adjudication Officers' Decisions'), a copy of which is held in the Library. As questions about a person's entitlement can arise during different types of interviews, it would be misleading to compare the total figures of disallowances with the total numbers of Employment Service interviews in any given period. Jobseeker's Allowance claims can be disallowed on labour market grounds or other grounds . However, some broad indication of volumes can be given by comparing the total number of Jobseeker's Allowance new claims with the number of awards of "nil benefits". This means simply the number of Jobseeker's Allowance new claims that, following assessment by the Benefits Agency who are responsible for Jobseeker's Allowance payment, result in no payment award. This could be for a wide variety of reasons ranging from inadequate contributions to failure to meet the labour market conditions for receipt of the Allowance.

Since Jobseeker's Allowance was introduced in October 1996, the number of claims processed and the number of nil awards by operational year has been:

	Claims processed	*Nil awards*
7 October 1996 to 31 March 1997	1,280,960	164,460
1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998	2,966,185	470,047
1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999	2,833,977	508,828
1 April 1999 to 31 October 1999	1,640,806	292,697

These figures are based primarily on information held by the Jobseeker's Allowance Payments System. The figures for the period ending 31 March 1997 include a small number of claims held on the Income Support Computer System because they linked back to an earlier Income Support claim.

I hope this is helpful.

Nursery Places

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he expects *(a)* the Government's target of free nursery places for 66 per cent. of three-year-olds to be met in every local education authority by 2002 and *(b)* levels of free provision to be higher than 66 per cent. in some areas by that date; and if he will make a statement. [101521]

Ms Hodge: The Government have set a target of providing a free education place for 66 per cent. of all three-year-olds nationally by 2002. We will achieve this as a result of investing £390 million over the three years 1999–2000 to 2001–02, in all local education authority areas. The funding will, however, priorities the areas with the greatest social needs

Many authorities have already invested their own resources to provide early education places for three-year-olds. The funding we are making available builds upon that and will extend provision across all authorities.

Classroom Assistants

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice he has issued to *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* local education authorities on (i) the employment of classroom assistants, (ii) extending their role within the classroom and (iii) providing incentives for classroom assistants to develop their knowledge and expertise in the fields of numeracy, literacy and record-keeping. [101705]

Ms Estelle Morris: A Supplement to the Standards Fund 2000–01 was issued on 27 October 1999. It advised Chief Education Officers of new arrangements to increase numbers of teaching assistants and to improve their training and career development. £130 million is being made available in 2000–01, enabling schools to recruit and train up to 15,000 additional full-time equivalent teaching assistants. LEAs must consult schools over relative local needs in deciding where assistants should be deployed.

The Department is developing a national framework of training and qualifications in partnership with the Local Government National Training Organisation and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. It is also producing guidance on the effective deployment of teaching assistants by heads and teachers. Both of these documents will be published next year following consultation with schools, local authorities and national bodies.

Local Education Authority Statistics

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by local education authority the number and percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998 and *(d)* 1999. [101520]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information available has been placed in the Library.

CABINET OFFICE

Magistrates

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to transfer responsibility for the appointment of magistrates from the Duchy of Lancaster to the Lord Chancellor. [101484]

Marjorie Mowlam: Decisions on proposals to transfer responsibilities between Departments are for the Prime Minister.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Ms Oona King: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress the Government have made in increasing the representation of ethnic minorities in the Civil Service. [101449]

Mr. Stringer: The "Modernising government" White Paper sets a target of doubling the proportion of people drawn from ethnic minority backgrounds in the Senior Civil Service to 3.2 per cent. in 2004–05. We will report on the progress we have made against these targets next year.

The proportion of ethnic minority staff in the Civil Service, as a whole, has increased from 4.2 per cent. in 1989 to 5.7 per cent. in 1998. This compares with 5.4 per cent. in the economically active population.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 9 December 1999

DEFENCE

Concordat (Scotland and Wales)

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will agree his concordat with the Scottish Executive and National Assembly for Wales. [102474]

Mr. Hoon: I have today agreed concordats with the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly, which set out the principles governing our bilateral relationships. A copy of these has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Missiles

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he plans to procure additional high velocity missiles from Shorts Missile Systems of Belfast. [102475]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am pleased to announce that the Defence Procurement Agency has now signed a contract with Shorts Missile Systems for additional High Velocity Missiles for the Army. The contract is valued at around £200 million and will sustain around 550 jobs at Shorts Missile Systems, with a further 170 jobs also sustained across their sub-contractors in the United Kingdom.

Aircraft Wiring

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what aircraft have been delivered for the use of British forces containing *(a)* PVC/Nylon wiring, *(b)* Poly-X wiring and *(c)* Kapton wiring; when the aircraft were delivered; and what is their life expectancy; [100926]

(2) how many British military aircraft contain *(a)* PVC/Nylon wiring, *(b)* Poly-X wiring and *(c)* Kapton wiring; and if he will list the types and locations of the aircraft concerned. [101041]

Mr. Spellar: Listed are details of how many British military aircraft contain PVC/Nylon, Poly-X or Kapton wiring, together with the type and location of the aircraft concerned. Details are also provided about when the aircraft first entered service and their approximate life expectancy:

(a) PVC/Nylon wiring. Some 580 military aircraft contain PVC/Nylon wiring.

Type of aircraft	*Main locations*	*Date first entered service*	*Life expectancy (approximate figures in years)*
Bulldog	University Air Squadrons	1972	30
Dominie	Cranwell	1965	50
Jetstream	Cranwell/Culdrose/Yeovilton	1972	50
Hercules	Lyneham	1966	45
Hawk	Valley/Leeming/Boscombe Down	1976	35
Nimrod	Kinloss	1969	40
VC10	Brize Norton	1966	45
Canberra	Marham	1951	55
Sea King	Yeovilton/Prestwick/Culdrose/and on RN ships, RAF Search and Rescue Units	1969	45
Chinook	Odiham	1980	35
Puma	Benson and Aldergrove	1971	40
Gazelle	Wattisham/Disforth/Middle Wallop/Odiham/and other Army units	1974	45

Note:
Chinook are wired with a mixture of PVC/Nylon and PTFE (Poly Tetra Fluoro Ethylene).

(b) Poly-X wiring. No RAF aircraft contain Poly-X wiring. However, a small number of early Army and Royal Navy Lynx helicopters were delivered with Poly-X wiring. Few of these aircraft are now in service and much of the wiring on these will have been replaced during upgrades.

(c) Kapton wiring. Kapton is a trademarked material. It is one of a range of polyimide coverings used to insulate aircraft wires. Some 740 British military aircraft contain wiring of this type.

Type of aircraft	*Main locations*	*Date first entered service*	*Life expectancy (approximate figures in years)*
Tornado	Marham/Bruggen/Lossiemouth/Leeming/Coningsby/Leuchars/Mount Pleasant	1980	40
Tucano	Linton-on-Ouse	1989	20
Harrier	Wittering/Cottesmere	1987	30
Sentry	Waddington	1991	35
Tristar	Brize Norton	1984	30
Lynx	Yeovilton	1976	45
BAe125	Northolt	1983	35
BAe146	Northolt	1986	30

Ferry Subsidies

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what account he will take of allegations about unfair subsidies to South Korean shipyards using IMF loans when determining the outcome of the MOD competition for roll-on, roll-off ferries; and if he will make a statement. [100573]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Bids from four consortia to provide a strategic Sealift service are currently being assessed. The ships will be commercial standard roll-on, roll-off ferries, owned by the service provider. We have specifically asked bidders proposing overseas build to demonstrate that UK build would not be competitive on similar terms. If there is evidence of subsidies, this will be fully taken into account in our evaluation.

Inspector of Kilts

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to appoint a new Inspector of Kilts. [100903]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Ministry of Defence has no such appointment and there are no plans to create one.

Anti-submarine Capability

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he has made a re-assessment of the United Kingdom's anti-submarine requirements since the publication of the Strategic Defence Review. [101669]

Mr. Hoon: The United Kingdom's anti-submarine warfare capabilities are kept under constant review in order to ensure that we maintain appropriate and balanced maritime forces. Since its publication, there has been no reason to revise the conclusion of the Strategic Defence Review, which confirmed a continuing decline in the likelihood of an open-ocean anti-submarine threat on the scale previously envisaged.

Peacekeeping

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the conditions under which the United Kingdom stands ready to provide destroyers and frigates for peacekeeping operations, as agreed in the Memorandum of Understanding signed with the United Nations; and if he will make a statement. [101672]

Mr. Hoon: The decision to commit any of the forces declared to the UN in the Memorandum of Understanding remains a national one taken on a case-by-case basis. Factors that will be taken into consideration when deciding whether to contribute to a specific UN peacekeeping operation include the aim of the operation, a clear exit strategy, the safety of UK personnel, and the level of other commitments.

Low Flying

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of low level flying training in the United Kingdom in the light of experience in Kosovo. [101502]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Low flying remains an important military tactic. While the circumstances in Kosovo were such that there was no requirement for fast jets to fly at low level, that might not be the case in future operations elsewhere. Regularly carrying out practice sorties within the UK Low Flying System remains the most effective way to ensure aircrew have the high levels of readiness necessary to take part in operations at low level, should the need arise.

Arms Brokers

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to maintain an arms broker company list; and if he will make a statement. [101926]

Mr. Kilfoyle: We have no plans at present to maintain a list of arms broker companies.

Ballistic Missile Programme

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what studies he is undertaking of theatre ballistic missile defence against land mobile missiles; and what is his target date for putting a theatre ballistic missile defence system into service. [102139]

Mr. Hoon: The Strategic Defence Review concluded that the technologies related to ballistic missile defence are changing rapidly and it would be premature to decide on acquiring such a capability. This remains our policy. We continue, however, to monitor developments in the risks posed by ballistic missiles and in the technology to counter them, and we are contributing to NATO preparations for studies into the feasibility of theatre ballistic missile defence. The terms of reference for our national programme of studies were announced by my predecessor, now Lord Robertson, on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 203W. These studies include issues concerned with defending against land-based, mobile, theatre ballistic missiles, as will the studies to be undertaken by NATO.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the President of the Council when she will publish the latest results of the market research tracking public perception of the millennium bug. [102535]

Mrs. Beckett: I have placed copies of the Executive Summary of the October tracking research in the Libraries of the House.

The latest results are broadly consistent with those for previous months, showing that anxiety among the public on this issue remains low.

The results of the November tracking research will be published in the next few weeks and I will place copies of the Executive Summary in the Libraries of the House as soon as they are available.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Line of Route

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee when she expects the Committee to publish its revised proposals for re-opening the Line of Route during the Summer Adjournment. [102143]

Mrs. Roe: I am pleased to advise the hon. Member that the Committee has now agreed new proposals, which will be published in the Committee's First Report of Session 1999–2000, entitled "Revised Framework for Re-opening the Line of Route during the Summer Adjournment". The Report, HC(1999–2000)98, will be published at 11.00 am on 13 December, and will be available to hon. Members in the Vote Office at that time.

In view of his interest in this matter, I have arranged for a copy of the Report to be sent to the hon. Member.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pension Funds

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will introduce legislation to prohibit companies from using existing pension funds to fund future pension responsibilities. [100599]

Mr. Rooker: Decisions relating to the present and future management of occupational pension schemes are matters for the sponsoring employers and the trustees of the schemes, taking into account the requirements of the law and the trust deed and rules of the schemes. We will continue to monitor developments, but we have no plans to change legislation in this area.

Bilateral Concordat (Scotland)

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the bilateral concordat between his Department and the Scottish Executive. [102473]

Mr. Darling: I am pleased to announce that the First Minister and I have agreed the text of the concordat between the Department of Social Security and the Scottish Executive. Copies of the concordat have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and the text will be available on the departmental website.

Income Thresholds

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the rates from April 2000 of income thresholds used for non-dependant deductions in housing benefit, income support and jobseeker's allowance, the earnings limit for dependants living with claimants of retirement pension, long-term incapacity benefits, severe disablement allowance and unemployability supplement, and the personal expenses allowance for claimants of jobseeker's allowance resident in local authority part III accommodation. [102742]

Mr. Darling: The income thresholds proposed for non-dependant deductions is as follows:

Income threshold

Up to £81.00

£81.00 to £119.99

£120.00 to £156.99

£157.00 to £206.99

£207.00 to £258.99

£259 and above.

The earnings limit proposed for dependants living with claimants of Retirement Pension, long-term incapacity benefits, severe disablement allowance and unemployability supplement is £52.20.

The proposed personal expenses allowance for claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance resident in local authority part III accommodation is £15.45.

Note:

This answer corrects errors in the original schedule of benefit rates, 10 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 564–78W.

Means-tested Benefits

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) on 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 13, by how much below 3.5 million he expects the number of pensioners on means-tested benefits will be reduced by 2050 as a result of the proposals in the Green Paper on the stakeholder pension and the second state pension. [102064]

Mr. Rooker: By 2050, it is estimated that there will be around 15.8 million pensioners. Without a change to current policies it is estimated that approximately one in three pensioner units (which could be either a single person or a couple) would retire onto the means-tested minimum income guarantee. This would include some people who had worked or cared for someone throughout their working life.

The proposals in the Government's Green Paper "Partnership in Pensions" are designed to ensure that someone with a full working life, or years covered by credits, will receive a pension on retirement above the minimum income guarantee.

The impact of the proposals will depend on a variety of factors, including employment records and additional voluntary savings. Our proposals seek to promote behavioural changes through the spread of low cost funded second pensions, improved pensions education, and the greater reward in retirement from helping people under pension age move from benefits to work.

For instance, with additional voluntary savings of 5 per cent., the figure of one in three pensioner units retiring onto the minimum income guarantee would fall to approximately one in five in 2050.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) of 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 7W, on means-tested benefits, if he will break down respectively the 8 million on means-tested benefits in 1997 and the 7.9 million expected to be on

means-tested benefits *(a)* by those above or below pensionable age and *(b)* of those below pensionable age, the proportion in receipt of in-work benefits. [102062]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the tables.

The proportion of people above and below age 60, in receipt of one or more means-tested benefits as at May 1997

	Number
Proportion under age 60	60% (4.8 million)
Proportion age 60 and over	40% (3.2 million)
Proportion under age 60 in receipt of in-work benefits	16%

The estimated proportion of people in receipt of one or more means tested benefits or tax credits as for 2001–02

	Number
Proportion under age 60	64% (5.0 million)
Proportion age 60 and over	36% (2.9 million)
Proportion under age 60 in receipt of in-work benefits	26%

Notes:

1. Means-tested benefits are Income Support, Income Based Jobseeker's Allowance, Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Working Families Tax Credit is included for the 2001–02 estimates.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest 100,000.
3. Figures refer to benefit units which may be a single person or couple.
4. Overlap between benefits have been taken into account.
5. Council Tax Benefit cases do not include second adult rebate cases.
6. Sample sizes:

Income Support: 5 per cent.

Family Credit: 5 per cent.

Disability Working Allowance: 100 per cent.

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit: 1 per cent.

7. Proportion under age 60 in receipt of in-work benefits is based on numbers receiving Family Credit and Disability Working Allowance for 1997 and Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Persons Tax Credit for 2001–02. In order to compare the years on the same basis, it excludes those in work receiving Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit only, as forecasts isolating this particular group are not available for 2001–02 figures (such recipients are included in the overall totals).

Sources:

1. Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 1997.
2. Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 1997.
3. Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.
5. Disability Working Allowance 100 per cent. count of claims.
5. Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample of claimants without Income Support/JSA(IB), taken at the end of May 1997.

Benefits (Automated Credit Transfer)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 54W, in each of the last 12 months, how many *(a)* existing beneficiaries have chosen to switch to automated credit transfer (ACT) as a proportion of those claiming each of the benefits payable by ACT and *(b)* new claimants as a proportion of those claiming each of the benefits payable by ACT have chosen to use ACT. [101938]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Information on the number of existing claimants who have chosen to switch to Automated Credit Transfer (ACT) is not currently available. Overall growth in the number of claimants choosing ACT increases by approximately 3 per cent. annually.

The proportion of new claimants choosing ACT for the year ending 30 August 1999

Benefit	*ACT take-up percentage*
Attendance Allowance	26
Child Benefit	54
Disability Living Allowance	33
Income Support	10
Incapacity Benefit	39
Retirement Pension and Widows Pension	48
War Pensions	50

Note:

Figures are not currently available for Jobseeker's Allowance and Invalid Care Allowance

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Housing

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of high concentrations of houses in multiple occupation on local communities. [101050]

Mr. Mullin: I am aware of concerns that have arisen in a few town and city neighbourhoods and am considering how these might be tackled. The Government are committed to introducing mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation when parliamentary time allows.

London Airports (Passengers)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the effect on the number of passengers passing through London airports in 2015, based on the recent studies of the European Commission and assuming all EU countries applied a similar rate of tax, if a fuel tax on all airlines were imposed *(a)* at a rate of ecu 245 per 1,000 litres and *(b)* at the same rate as motor fuel excise (excise duty and VAT) in the UK. [101807]

Mr. Mullin: We are currently reviewing the Commission's recent Communication and related study. We are also working, through the International Civil Aviation Organisation, to examine a range of market based options to limit or reduce emissions from aviation. It would be premature to focus on the effects of specific rates of tax on numbers of passengers at the London airports: no such proposals have been made.

Education Standard Spending Assessment

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the expected SSA per pupil is for *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary pupils for each shire county education authority for the year 2000–01. [101829]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested is in the table.

2000–01 Consultation SSA for primary and secondary education

£/pupil

County Council	*Consultation SSA 2000–01*	
	Primary	*Secondary*
Bedfordshire	2,390	3,081
Buckinghamshire	2,390	3,093
Cambridgeshire	2,313	2,964
Cheshire	2,257	2,897
Cornwall	2,369	3,058
Cumbria	2,357	3,031
Derbyshire	2,266	2,923
Devon	2,345	3,038
Dorset	2,282	2,926
Durham	2,390	3,095
East Sussex	2,445	3,166
Essex	2,441	3,147
Gloucestershire	2,282	2,935
Hampshire	2,327	3,014
Hertfordshire	2,474	3,170
Kent	2,443	3,149
Lancaster	2,361	3,043
Leicestershire	2,202	2,848
Lincolnshire	2,359	3,041
Norfolk	2,378	3,052
North Yorkshire	2,332	2,983
Northamptonshire	2,308	2,974
Northumberland	2,332	3,014
Nottinghamshire	2,291	2,962
Oxfordshire	2,397	3,070
Shropshire	2,304	2,960
Somerset	2,310	2,984
Staffordshire	2,237	2,884
Suffolk	2,313	2,960
Surrey	2,436	3,127
Warwickshire	2,267	2,918
West Sussex	2,366	3,044
Wiltshire	2,292	2,971
Worcestershire	2,256	2,902

Farm-based Waste Recycling

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what planning guidance he gives to local authorities on the development of sites for deep clamp processing in farm-based waste recycling. [101673]

Ms Beverley Hughes: There is no planning guidance relating specifically to the development of sites for deep clamp processing of farm-based waste recycling. General guidance on planning control over waste management facilities, including composting sites, is contained in PPG10. Guidance on development related to agriculture and to farm diversification is contained in PPG7.

Community Sports Clubs

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what encouragement he gives to local authorities to give rate relief to community sports clubs; what statistics he collects in this regard; and if he will make a statement. [101721]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Local authorities have full discretion to award up to 100 per cent. rate relief to non-profit making organisations, including sports clubs that meet the qualifying criteria. The Central Council of Physical Recreation estimates that there are 150,000 voluntary sports clubs affiliated to the national governing bodies of sport in the United Kingdom. However, we do not hold centrally information on the number of clubs subject to non-domestic rates, their rateable values or their rates bills reflecting discretionary relief awarded by local authorities.

We have been reviewing the arrangements under which local authorities may grant this relief to non-profit making sports clubs and expect to issue a consultation paper early next year.

Homelessness

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for each district and unitary authority in (i) the South East Region and (ii) the Eastern Region, how many people were *(a)* registered homeless and *(b)* on the local authority waiting list for the last and current financial years. [101826]

Mr. Mullin: Homeless households accepted by local authorities are those which, after investigation, were found to be eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and in priority need under part VII of the Housing Act 1996. The latest available information is given in the table, covering 1998–99 and the first quarter of 1999–2000 for homeless households.

	Homeless households accepted and in priority need		*Number of households on the housing register at 1 April 1999*
	1998–99	*1999–2000*[1]	
South East Region			
Adur	294	79	1,162
Arun	192	58	689
Ashford	89	20	2,201
Aylesbury Vale	219	65	841
Basingstoke and Deane	146	[2]n/a	4,245
Bracknell Forest	73	21	1,308
Brighton and Hove	868	234	3,610
Canterbury	214	57	1,920
Cherwell	138	50	2,422
Chichester	88	24	2,148
Chiltern	124	34	667
Crawley	191	51	465
Dartford	86	26	1,575
Dover	107	31	2,231
East Hampshire	116	26	1,828
Eastbourne	466	99	1,753
Eastleigh	128	26	1,200
Elmbridge	188	35	1,976
Epsom and Ewell	72	14	537
Fareham	120	21	929
Gosport	254	61	1,167
Gravesham	84	21	1,847
Guildford	118	38	1,603
Hart	58	36	588
Hastings	140	30	1,490
Havant	324	71	2,714
Horsham	221	60	710
Isle of Wight	270	69	1,122
Lewes	189	42	818
Maidstone	114	39	959
Mid Sussex	205	31	1,418
Milton Keynes	537	185	2,835
Mole Valley	83	21	1,177
New Forest	293	66	1,383
Oxford	382	[2]n/a	3,099
Portsmouth	670	134	4,759
Reading	464	123	3,343
Reigate and Banstead	156	28	1,155
Rother	52	10	1,176
Runnymede	58	23	694
Rushmoor	188	[2]n/a	2,221
Sevenoaks	201	42	1,444

	Homeless households accepted and in priority need		Number of households on the housing register at
	1998–99	1999–2000[1]	1 April 1999
Shepway	128	24	2,595
Slough	213	0	1,739
South Bucks	34	6	1,064
South Oxfordshire	140	43	1,488
Southampton	663	159	3,699
Spelthorne	59	19	2,284
Surrey Heath	111	31	436
Swale	55	22	1,815
Tandridge	97	26	1,077
Test Valley	125	30	1,723
Thanet	42	13	1,528
The Medway Towns	113	38	3,708
Tonbridge and Malling	150	45	658
Tunbridge Wells	242	55	674
Vale of White Horse	126	27	1,919
Waverley	91	14	1,288
Wealden	185	[2]n/a	1,066
West Berkshire	209	41	887
West Oxfordshire	38	9	1,453
Winchester	55	22	1,129
Windsor and Maidenhead	42	7	2,419
Woking	120	35	1,547
Wokingham	122	24	1,359
Worthing	218	[2]n/a	1,361
Wycombe	268	37	996
East of England Region			
Babergh	106	[2]n/a	1,074
Basildon	429	72	2,878
Bedford	283	84	2,449
Braintree	167	45	2,503
Breckland	156	41	1,477
Brentwood	89	22	513
Broadland	209	43	1,066
Broxbourne	376	50	1,668
Cambridge	200	48	4,319
Castle Point	153	40	662
Chelmsford	316	83	3,733
Colchester	588	169	3,237
Dacorum	223	[2]n/a	3,479
East Cambridgeshire	167	32	1,042
East Hertfordshire	132	31	1,502
Epping Forest	119	23	1,914
Fenland	130	31	1,839
Forest Heath	66	7	1,063
Great Yarmouth	118	30	1,915
Harlow	252	61	1,933
Hertsmere	64	10	657
Huntingdonshire	113	19	1,791
Ipswich	182	46	2,764
Kings Lynn and West Norfolk	95	33	1,390
Luton	209	41	5,622
Maldon	84	27	511
Mid Bedfordshire	73	8	1,648
Mid Suffolk	89	22	1,545
North Hertfordshire	179	65	1,955
North Norfolk	187	51	860
Norwich	459	119	2,909
Peterborough	95	25	3,129
Rochford	60	11	873
South Bedfordshire	282	66	2,649
South Cambridgeshire	67	17	2,293
South Norfolk	130	35	1,524
Southend-on-Sea	83	[2]n/a	1,070
St. Albans	154	[2]n/a	1,603
St. Edmundsbury	93	27	1,801
Stevenage	102	22	3,249
Suffolk Coastal	121	38	955
Tendring	425	106	1,960
Three Rivers	134	[2]n/a	818
Thurrock	163	38	1,795
Uttlesford	73	[2]n/a	963
Watford	176	60	1,472
Waveney	182	45	1,675
Welwyn Hatfield	262	49	2,201

[1] April-June 1999

[2] n/a denotes that the authority has not yet reported

Source:

Housing Investment Programme returns 1999 and Quarterly PIE (Homelessness Activity) returns 1999 Q1

Local authorities have different practices for compiling and managing housing register/waiting lists which mean that simple comparisons between authorities can be misleading.

Vehicle Removal

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will consult police and local authorities about amending paragraph 10 of the Removal and Disposal of Vehicles Regulations 1986 (SI 1986/183) so as to reduce the period before which notice must be affixed to vehicles about to be removed for destruction from seven to three days. [101719]

Mr. Mullin: We have no plans to consult the police or local authorities on changing the period of notice they must give before removing abandoned vehicles. The existing regulations are intended to provide owners with safeguards against a local authority prematurely assuming a vehicle is abandoned and having it towed away for scrap. They also ensure that local authorities do not have to go to the unnecessary expense of removing and storing vehicles that may not, in the event, have been abandoned.

We believe that the current legislation provides a good balance between the powers of the police and local authorities to deal with abandoned vehicles and the rights of vehicle owners.

Shropshire RSG

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in which years between 1979 and 1999 the Government's revenue support grant for Shropshire County Council increased by double the rate of inflation or more. [102137]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Revenue Support Grant (RSG) was introduced in 1990. Between 1990–91 and 1992–93, Shropshire County Council received no RSG directly; the grant was paid into the collection funds operated by billing authorities, and thus supported expenditure by all tiers of authorities.

Only in 1994–95 was the increase in RSG of 11.06 per cent. more than twice the rate of inflation of 1.43 per cent., as measured by the GDP deflator. The increase in 1999–2000 in RSG and the county's share of national non-domestic rates of 6.01 per cent. was also more than twice the rate of inflation of 2.25 per cent. The change in RSG was affected in 1995–96 by the transfer of the RSG for police service to West Mercia Police Authority and in 1998–99 by the creation of Telford and the Wrekin as a separate unitary authority, thus precluding meaningful comparisons for those years.

Thameslink 2000 Project

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Railtrack's applications for Orders under the Transport and Works Act 1992 in respect of the Thameslink 2000 Project. [102136]

Mr. Hill: Railtrack applied in September 1999 for an Order under the Transport and Works Act 1992 to revise the proposals contained in the November 1997 application

for powers to improve and extend the Thameslink network. The Secretary of State has received a total of about 1,000 objections to both applications. In view of the range and nature of the objections he has decided that it would be appropriate to hold a public inquiry into this scheme. This will probably start in the spring of 2000.

Foreign Aircraft (Millennium)

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking relating to foreign aircraft operating to the UK over the Millennium period. [102448]

Mr. Hill: My Department has issued foreign airlines with their normal operating permits for providing services to and from the UK. These permits are granted to airlines only if they comply with international safety standards. In view of the Y2K problem, my Department has taken the exceptional step of asking airlines to provide information confirming that flights would be free from any Y2K safety related risk. The airlines have been advised that, in the event of such information not being provided, the Department reserves the right to suspend their permits over the critical period.

Two airlines have yet to provide confirmation that their flights will be free from any Y2K safety related risk. These are Gulf Air; and Southern Aviation (Zambia). These airlines have therefore been advised that, unless such confirmation is received, their permits to operate to the UK over the Millennium period will be suspended.

Non-domestic Rates

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the basis of his calculations of the distributable amount of non-domestic rates for 2000–01. [102548]

Ms Armstrong: The amount of non-domestic rates in England for 2000–01 to be redistributed to Local Authorities will be £15,400 million, although estimated payments into the pool in 2000–01 will be £14,342 million. The non-domestic rate poundage (multiplier) will be 41.6 pence. The Distributable Amount includes an allowance of £415 million for an Exchequer payment to the non-domestic rates pool, to compensate for the shortfall which would otherwise occur as a result of the regulations under section 58 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 and the transitional relief scheme, announced on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 770.

The calculation for 2000–01, and the prior-year figures on which this is based, are set out in the following table.

National non-domestic rates—calculations of distributable amount for 2000–01

£ million

	1997–98 *Final outturn*	*1998–99* *Provisional outturn*	*1999–2000* *Provisional outturn*	*2000–01* *Estimated in-year contribution*
1. Income from Local lists				
Multiplier (p)	45.8	47.4	48.9	41.6
Gross Rate Yield	13,493	13,839	14,158	15,067
(i) Reliefs				
(a) Net Transitional Relief	–430	–482	–460	–737
(b) Empty properties	–934	–961	–944	–987
(c) Charitable	–495	–504	–520	–544
(d) Rural Shops and Post Offices	—	–2	–2	–2
(e) Discretionary	–17	–18	–32	–33
Net Yield after reliefs	11,617	11,872	12,200	12,764
(ii) Collection costs/reductions to contributions				
(a) Costs of collection	–78	–79	–83	–83
(b) Losses on collection	–112	–109	–115	–120
(c) City of London offset	–7	–7	–7	–7
Total contribution in respect of year	11,420	11,677	11,995	12,554
(iii) Repayments/interest payments				
Total adjustments	–291	–486	–270	–367
Net Local Yield	11,129	11,191	11,725	12,187
2. Income from Central list				
Net Central List Yield	1,207	1,273	1,320	1,330
3. Income from Crown				
Contributions in Aid				
Net Crown Yield	469	440	396	410
Total NDR Yield	12,805	12,904	13,441	13,927
4. Exchequer Contributions				
Total Exchequer contributions	400	360	310	415
Total NNDR pool payments (1+2+3+4)	13,205	13,264	13,751	14,342

National non-domestic rates—calculations of distributable amount for 2000–01

£ million

	1997–98 Final outturn	1998–99 Provisional outturn	1999–2000 Provisional outturn	2000–01 Estimated in-year contribution
5. Adjustments				
Surplus brought forward	–1,000	178	919	1,058
Combined total	12,205	13,442	14,670	15,400
Distributable amount	12,027	12,524	13,612	15,400
Surplus carried forward	178	919	1,058	0

Notes:
The amounts shown are those recorded in the post end-year (NNDR3) returns. For 1999–2000 the amounts shown are the estimated outturn for the year based mainly upon authorities' provisional contributions to the non-domestic rating pool.
1. Item 1: The gross calculated rate yield represents the total value of non-domestic hereditaments on local rating lists times the multiplier.
2. Item 1(i)(a): The Transitional decrease adjustment includes the estimated amount of rates that will not be recouped from local list ratepayers under the transitional arrangements made by regulations under section 58 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 and the transitional relief scheme, announced by written PQ on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 770W.
3. Item 1(i)(b): The empty property relief adjustments include voids and partially occupied hereditaments. The 2000–01 figure includes an allowance for the increase in the gross rates yield.
4. Item 1(i)(c): Charitable rate relief. The 2000–01 figure includes an allowance for the increase in the gross rates yield.
5. Item 1(i)(d): Rural Shops and Post Office relief. Figures for 1998–99 onwards include mandatory relief for village shops and post offices under the Local Government and Rating Act 1997. The 2000–01 figure includes an allowance for the increase in the gross rates yield.
6. Item 1(i)(e): Discretionary relief granted to charities, non-profit making organisations and for other reasons including, for 1998–99 onwards, discretionary relief for village shops and post offices under the Local Government and Rating Act 1997. The 2000–01 figure includes an allowance for the increase in the gross rates yield.
7. Item 1(ii)(a) and (b): The allowances for the costs and losses incurred by authorities in collecting non-domestic rates from ratepayers.
8. Item 1(ii)(c): City Offset—the amount which the City of London will not be required to pay into the non-domestic rating pool. It is the amount which will be retained by the City to meet its own expenditure.
9. Item 1(iii): net adjustment in respect of appeals and other amendments to the rating list affecting liability for previous years rates settled in that year.
10. Item 2: the rateable value of non-domestic hereditaments on the central rating list times the multiplier, less the net effect of transitional arrangements, and adjusted for appeals and other changes in respect of previous years.
11. Item 3: the 2000–01 figure for Crown properties includes an allowance for the effect of transitional arrangements.
12. Item 4: the contribution from central government to offset the amount of the Secretary of State's estimate of income forgone as a result of transitional arrangements established by regulations under section 58 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 and the transitional relief scheme, announced by written PQ on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 770W.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

GCSE Passes

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by local education authority the number and percentage of 18-year-olds with five GCSE passes or equivalent in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [101519]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 8 December 1999]:* The numbers of 18-year-olds with five GCSE passes or equivalent in 1997 and 1998 for local education authorities in England are shown in the following table. Figures for 1999, other than those released last month in performance tables, are not yet available. It is not possible to provide percentages as these may be misleading—population estimates for local education authorities are based on the resident population, and the GCSE data are institution based. Percentages for individual local education authorities would therefore be distorted by students who are resident in one authority but who took their GCSEs in another.

Number of 18-year-olds with 5+A-G GCSE/GNVQ*

LEA	1997	1998
City of London	213	203
Camden	1,823	1,989
Greenwich	1,862	1,810
Hackney	860	924
Hammersmith and Fulham	1,060	1,224
Islington	1,139	1,141
Kensington and Chelsea	1,107	1,153
Lambeth	608	626
Lewisham	1,806	1,949
Southwark	1,284	1,395
Tower Hamlets	1,281	1,425
Wandsworth	1,828	1,807
City of Westminster	1,282	1,410
Barking and Dagenham	1,422	1,436
Barnet	3,371	3,544
Bexley	2,081	2,136
Brent	1,334	1,566
Bromley	3,312	3,391
Croydon	3,533	3,524
Ealing	1,901	2,174
Enfield	2,504	2,645
Haringey	1,056	1,105
Harrow	2,635	2,540
Havering	2,820	2,811
Hillingdon	2,387	2,529
Hounslow	1,965	2,036
Kingston upon Thames	1,776	1,803
Merton	1,260	1,295
Newham	1,630	1,949
Redbridge	2,373	2,515
Richmond upon Thames	2,051	2,150
Sutton	1,639	1,777
Waltham Forest	2,098	2,283
Birmingham	9,438	10,007
Coventry	3,053	3,147
Dudley	3,529	3,738
Sandwell	2,469	2,577

Number of 18-year-olds with 5+A-G GCSE/GNVQ*

LEA	*1997*	*1998*
Solihull	3,038	3,068
Walsall	2,639	2,688
Wolverhampton	2,474	2,587
Knowsley	1,205	1,233
Liverpool	4,082	4,188
St. Helens	2,045	2,034
Sefton	3,498	3,565
Wirral	3,642	3,697
Bolton	2,781	2,878
Bury	2,331	2,353
Manchester	3,523	3,634
Oldham	2,749	2,932
Rochdale	1,798	1,980
Salford	1,928	2,046
Stockport	3,487	3,682
Tameside	2,203	2,363
Trafford	2,128	2,215
Wigan	4,065	4,215
Barnsley	2,009	2,019
Doncaster	2,704	2,908
Rotherham	2,857	3,056
Sheffield	4,372	4,543
Bradford	4,884	5,179
Calderdale	1,888	1,978
Kirklees	4,277	4,396
Leeds	6,699	7,069
Wakefield	3,464	3,544
Gateshead	1,927	1,936
Newcastle upon Tyne	2,673	2,827
North Tyneside	2,202	2,204
South Tyneside	1,599	1,678
Sunderland	3,242	3,280
Isles of Scilly	8	13
Bath and North East Somerset	2,192	2,174
City of Bristol	3,458	3,633
North Somerset	1,841	1,914
South Gloucestershire	2,591	2,676
Hartlepool	978	976
Middlesbrough	1,663	1,812
Redcar and Cleveland	1,695	1,688
Stockton on Tees	1,979	1,993
City of Kingston upon Hull	2,773	2,720
East Riding of Yorkshire	2,951	2,959
North East Lincolnshire	1,835	1,969
North Lincolnshire	1,837	1,913
North Yorkshire	5,963	6,207
City of York	2,221	2,109
Bedfordshire	4,401	4,528
Luton	2,024	2,063
Buckinghamshire	5,220	5,303
Milton Keynes	2,237	2,229
Derbyshire	7,322	7,498
City of Derby	2,264	2,399
Dorset	3,729	3,848
Poole	1,944	2,034
Bournemouth	1,273	1,280
Durham	5,110	5,118
Darlington	1,268	1,314
East Sussex	4,491	4,687
Brighton and Hove	2,289	2,276
Hampshire	13,570	14,290
Portsmouth	1,383	1,465
Southampton	2,197	2,227
Leicestershire	6,140	6,432
City of Leicester	2,921	3,162
Rutland	666	685
Staffordshire	8,671	9,137
Stoke-on-Trent	2,347	2,306
Wiltshire	4,297	4,271
Swindon	1,881	1,946
Berkshire	8,991	—
Bracknell Forest	—	1,271
Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead	—	1,645
West Berkshire	—	2,033
Reading	—	1,216
Slough	—	1,359
Wokingham	—	1,636
Cambridgeshire	7,544	—
Cambridgeshire	—	5,856
City of Peterborough	—	2,114
Cheshire	11,059	—
Cheshire	—	7,802
Halton	—	1,432
Warrington	—	2,028
Devon	10,855	—
Devon	—	6,740
City of Plymouth	—	2,885
Torbay	—	1,419
Essex	16,759	—
Essex	—	13,943
Southend	—	1,852
Thurrock	—	1,423
Hereford and Worcester	7,829	—
Herefordshire	—	1,666
Worcestershire	—	6,342
Kent	17,251	—
Kent	—	14,568
Medway	—	3,211
Lancashire	14,352	—
Lancashire	—	10,869
Blackburn with Darwen	—	2,173
Blackpool	—	1,861
Nottinghamshire	10,038	—
Nottinghamshire	—	7,725
City of Nottingham	—	2,924
Shropshire	5,145	—
Shropshire	—	3,161
Telford and Wrekin	—	1,876
Cornwall	5,149	5,376
Cumbria	5,058	5,352
Gloucestershire	6,136	6,271
Hertfordshire	12,273	12,646
Isle of Wight	1,308	1,403
Lincolnshire	6,356	6,482
Norfolk	7,737	8,002
Northamptonshire	6,782	7,162
Northumberland	3,529	3,412
Oxfordshire	6,722	6,904
Somerset	5,624	5,846
Suffolk	7,191	7,298
Surrey	11,369	11,521
Warwickshire	5,761	5,936
West Sussex	7,719	7,794
All LEAs	502,370	519,398

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Working Time Directive

4. **Mr. Shaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, what assessment he has made of employment agencies compliance with the Working Time Directive. [100527]

Mr. Alan Johnson: It is too soon to assess the level of compliance. Our revised employment agency regulations will help prevent bureaux acting in a way which denies workers their working time rights.

20. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which EU member states have exempted small businesses from the Working Time Regulations. [100546]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Working Time Directive which has been implemented in Great Britain by the Working Time Regulations, requires member states to extend its provisions to all businesses regardless of size. Only workers in the excluded sectors (transport, doctors in training and offshore) are exempt.

Miners Compensation

15. **Mr. Rowlands:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his estimate is of the number of miners compensation claims which have been agreed. [100541]

32. **Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the number of compensation claims from retired miners that have been settled. [100561]

Mrs. Liddell: As at the end of November, the Department had made 4,186 full and final payments and 5,523 part payments to ex-miners suffering from Vibration White Finger. A further 584 full and final payments and 15,460 part payments have been made to ex-miners and their families suffering from respiratory diseases. To date the Department has made payments totalling some £89 million.

Inward Investment (Merseyside)

16. **Maria Eagle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on inward investment to Merseyside. [100542]

Mr. Caborn: Since May 1997 my Department has made 255 offers of Regional Selective Assistance in the Merseyside area, including 31 offers to overseas companies, creating or safeguarding nearly 18,000 jobs. Major inward investment successes have included Capital Bank and the new Jaguar X400 saloon.

Small Businesses

17. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many rules and regulations have been repealed since May 1997 by his Department to assist small businesses. [100543]

Ms Hewitt: Between May 1997 and October 1999 my Department made 25 regulations that reduced costs on business, including small business.

We have taken many other actions to assist small businesses. For example, we have introduced legislation on late payment, we are setting up the Small Business Service, and we are consulting on proposals to raise the thresholds below which small companies are exempt from requirements to file full accounts and to have those accounts audited.

31. **Mr. Dobbin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to encourage technical innovation in small businesses. [100560]

Ms Hewitt: As indicated in the consultation document, "The Small Business Service—A Public Consultation" (URN 99/815), I intend to improve the coherence and customer-focus of my Department's support for small businesses by making most such support accessible through the Small Business Service. In addition, I have already announced that the Smart scheme has been expanded to a commitment of over £100 million over the period 1999–2000 to 2001–02 and its scope enlarged so that now even more small businesses will benefit from cash support for technology development and acquisition. The new Enterprise Fund will provide regional and high-tech venture capital funds for start-ups and small companies with growth potential. Also, my Department's funding for the TCS scheme is being doubled and we are creating a national network of Faraday Partnerships designed to support knowledge transfer to small businesses in particular.

Energy Policy

18. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Government's energy policy. [100544]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government's overall energy policy objective, as set out in last year's White Paper, "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government Response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee" (Cm 4071), is

> "to ensure secure diverse, and sustainable supplies of energy at competitive prices".

British Coal (Equal Pay)

19. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action his Department is taking to achieve a settlement of the equal value pay case for British Coal canteen workers. [100545]

Mr. Alan Johnson: This litigation is a matter for British Coal.

Bankruptcy

21. **Mr. Beard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for reviewing the charges to small businesses and individuals arising from bankruptcy proceedings. [100547]

Ms Hewitt: The Working Party on the remuneration of insolvency office holders, chaired by Mr. Justice Ferris, submitted an initial report in July 1998 and, subsequently, the Society of Practitioners of Insolvency issued interim guidance on the information to be provided to creditors on applications for remuneration. A final report from Mr. Justice Ferris's Working Party is expected to be published in the new year.

Balance of Trade

22. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the latest announcement on the balance of trade. [100549]

Mr. Caborn: In the three months to September, the deficit on trade in goods and services was at its narrowest for almost a year. The volume of goods and services exported grew by over 6 per cent., the fastest rate of growth for 20 years.

EH101 Helicopter

23. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the royalties to be received by his Department as a result of Launch Aid upon sales of the EH101 helicopter. [100550]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Launch investment returns depend on the level of sales of each product in which the Government have invested. Information about possible levies arising from individual projects is commercially confidential.

Levies have not yet been received on the civil version of the EH101 helicopter.

Recruitment Industry

24. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress he has made in his discussions with the Treasury over proposals to regulate the private recruitment industry. [100551]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Discussions with HM Treasury and other Departments on the proposed revision of the regulations governing agency conduct are continuing. We will make an announcement in due course.

Manufacturing

25. **Mrs. Organ:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the prospects for profitability and volume of exports of the manufacturing sector. [100552]

Mr. Caborn: In 1998 the profitability of manufacturing companies was at the highest level for 30 years and surveys by British Chambers of Commerce show confidence in manufacturing profitability at its highest level for over two years. Export growth has picked up sharply, with the latest figures showing that export volumes in the third quarter rose by 9.6 per cent., the fastest rate of growth for 20 years. Most economic forecasters expect this improvement to continue into next year.

29. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he last met the Staffordshire chamber of commerce and industry to discuss the manufacturing industry. [100557]

Ms Hewitt: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry had a very useful meeting on 15 November 1999 with the North Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce, of which the Staffordshire Chamber is a division.

During his visit he had wide-ranging discussions covering manufacturing industry and also visited two manufacturing businesses in the county.

Home Safety (Children)

27. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he is taking to improve child safety in the home. [100554]

Dr. Howells: The safety of toys and other articles used by children feature prominently in product safety standards, and the regulations which my Department administers.

In addition, the DTI produces and distributes safety awareness materials free of charge to local authorities and other safety professionals on a wide range of home safety topics, many of which are designed to help to reduce accidents to children.

I launched the first in a series of child safety magazines on 24 November, jointly produced by Government, business and the voluntary sector, for expectant parents and parents of babies and young children and strongly featuring child safety in the home.

I also launched Child Safety Week in June 1999, an initiative aimed at reducing accidents to children which DTI helped fund, run by the Child Accident Prevention Trust.

Cluster Development

28. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to ensure that cluster development is evenly distributed across the UK. [100556]

Ms Hewitt: None. The Government attach considerable importance to clusters and recently announced new mechanisms for taking forward the development of their clusters policy. These include a new Clusters Policy Steering Group to be chaired by my noble Friend Lord Sainsbury, the Minister for Science; a full mapping study of cluster activity in the UK and the identification and promotion of emerging clusters in the RDA's regional economic strategies. The Government believe that clusters are market driven. As such, the Governments's key role is to create the conditions, in all parts of the UK, which encourage the formation and sustainable growth of clusters and enable and nurture progress.

EU Directives

30. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps his Department is taking to monitor implementation of EU directives relating to trade and industry matters in other member states. [100558]

Mrs. Liddell: The Department monitors the implementation of EU Single Directives in other member states through the European Commission's publication "The Single Market Scoreboard" and through contacts with UK industry and the Commission . The Scoreboard is published twice a year and is a very useful monitoring mechanism on the health of the Single Market. The Scoreboard, which is available in the House of Commons Library, includes a section covering rates of transposition of Directives in all EU states. The Scoreboard is regularly discussed at the Internal Market Council. We also, through our action Single Market unit, pursue individual complaints from UK industry with the member state in question and with the Commission.

Recruitment Costs

33. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what evidence he has assessed that temporary to permanent fees discourage employers from offering a permanent job to a temporary worker. [100562]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Department has received representations from work-seekers, unions, employment agencies and employers that these fees can discourage employers from taking on temporary workers permanently.

National Minimum Wage

34. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will review the level of the national minimum wage. [100563]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I am keeping the operation of the national minimum wage legislation under review with the help of the independent Low Pay Commission. As with its introduction, any future change to the level of the minimum wage will be made sensibly, taking account of the economic circumstances prevailing at the time.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many anonymous calls have been made to the minimum wage hotline giving information relating to breaches of the minimum wage legislation. [101479]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The National Minimum Wage Helpline does not disaggregate calls between anonymous and non-anonymous calls. All calls are followed up. In addition, a number of employers are phoning the helpline to tell us about their competitors who are paying below the national minimum wage. These calls are also followed up.

International Postal Services

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the future of international postal services. [100553]

Mr. Alan Johnson: With increased globalisation, the international market in postal services is forecast to grow much faster than domestic markets. Success in these areas will depend on ability to develop and sustain high quality, competitively priced products and services in response to changing and fast-moving customer demand, developments in new technology and ever-increasing competition. That is why this Government have made it a priority to give the Post Office the greater commercial freedom it needs to be a world-class service provider in the twenty first century.

EU Company Law Directive (Takeover Bids)

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the progress of the 13th company law directive concerning takeover bids. [101605]

Mr. Byers: Political agreement was reached on the proposed 13th Company Law Directive at the Internal Market Council in June this year, with the exception of one point, a Spanish objection concerning the application of the directive to Gibraltar. Since then Her Majesty's Government and the Government of Spain have been negotiating a solution to this question.

Energy Council

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the outcome of the Energy Council held in Brussels on 2 December; and if he will make a statement. [101691]

Mrs. Liddell: The Council considered several matters of interest to the United Kingdom.

The Commission made two presentations on the Internal electricity market. The first concerned progress on implementation of the electricity directive and the second harmonisation measures in electricity which look at cross border trading issues in respect of transmission pricing and congestion. As regards the implementation report, I expressed disappointment that the Directive had not been implemented in all member states and stressed the importance of a level playing field which ensured fairness for everyone. I also congratulated the Commission on taking prompt action against those which had not implemented the directive. I said that fully open energy markets in Europe was a high priority for the UK because this would increase the competitiveness of European companies and reduce prices for consumers. I also called for progress far beyond the market opening levels set out in the Directive. On the harmonisation of cross border trading mechanisms the Council agreed conclusions which note the work of the transmission system operators to develop transmission pricing mechanisms and procedures for managing congestion; encourage them to come forward with early proposals for a resolution of outstanding issues and invite the Commission to monitor progress and to come forward with its own proposals if the system operators are unable to reach a final agreement. I announced that the UK and the Netherlands are working on competition indicators to show how well competition is developing and where barriers persist. The results of this work will be shared with the Commission and other member states.

In the absence of a proposal from the Commission on the access for renewables to the internal electricity market, the Council was unable to have a full exchange of views. I expressed disappointment at the continued delay and urged the Commission to come forward with a proposal as soon as possible. I said such a proposal should minimise distortions, ensure transparency, provide flexibility to distinguish between different kinds of renewables and promote cost-effectiveness and price competitiveness and that we supported the Commission in its objectives of promoting renewables as part of the response to Kyoto and the progressive inclusion of renewables in the internal electricity market. I was among a number of ministers who counselled against the inclusion of binding targets for renewables in the directive, this being a matter best left to member states, thereby respecting the principle of subsidiary.

The Council agreed a report to the Helsinki European Council on integration of environmental and sustainable development into energy policy which focused on priority areas for action, which include the development of the internal energy market and the promotion of renewables and energy efficiency measures.

In addition, the Energy Council held an orientation debate on a proposal for a directive on energy efficiency requirements of ballasts for fluorescent lighting aimed at raising product standards in Europe. Council conclusions were approved on strengthening the northern dimension of European energy policy with a view to improving co-ordination of actions between countries bordering the Baltic Sea and on the North West Region of Russia and to help provide greater focus for EU support mechanisms.

The Council also note reports on gas harmonisation, gas security of supply, a progress report on the energy Charter Treaty including a negotiating directive for a transit protocol and information from the Commission on the millennium bug and a Community energy efficiency action plan.

Energy Suppliers

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures are being taken to prevent energy suppliers taking over the electricity and gas contracts of customers without their authority; and what penalties are proposed for those companies that do so. [101908]

Mrs. Liddell: These matters are the responsibility of the Director General of Gas and Electricity Supply. I am aware that Ofgem is continuing to work hard with the industry to tighten up the transfer process.

My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State has recently announced a research study to look at consumer motivations for and against switching supplier.

Pirate Radio Stations

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people and organisations have been prosecuted in each of the last three years for *(a)* advertising on and *(b)* sponsoring pirate radio stations. [102033]

Ms Hewitt: So far this year three people have been prosecuted for managing the operation of pirate radio stations. In 1998 one person was similarly convicted and a further three in 1997. One of those convicted this year and one of those in 1997 were also convicted for advertising.

Regulatory Impact Assessments

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has undertaken of the effect of regulations affecting businesses on operating costs. [100537]

Mr. Byers: The Government require an assessment to be carried out on all proposed regulations that might affect business before they are introduced.

British Sugar (Gas-fired Power Station)

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on British Sugar plc's application to build a new gas-fired power station at the British Sugar factory at Cantley, Norfolk. [102573]

Mrs. Liddell: I have today granted consent under Section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 to British Sugar plc for the construction of a 70 MW gas-fired combined heat and power station at the British Sugar factory at Cantley, near Norwich in Norfolk. The station has also today been given clearance as a gas-fired station under Section 14 of the Energy Act 1976 and planning permission for the Development has been deemed to be granted, subject to 37 planning conditions agreed with the Broads Authority, Broadland District Council and Norfolk County Council. The decisions have been taken in accordance with the policy set out in the White Paper entitled "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee" (Cm 4071).

Copies of the Press Notice and decision letters are being placed in the Library of the House.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Bill Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to publish the bilateral Concordat between UK Government Departments and the Scottish Executive on EU Structural Funds. [102574]

Mr. Byers: The First Minister and I have today agreed the text of a Concordat on the EU Structural Funds between the UK Government Departments DTI, DETR, DfEE, MAFF and DCMS and the Scottish Executive. Copies of the Concordat have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Research and Development

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of Britain's gross domestic product was devoted to research and development on the latest available figures; and what the equivalent figure was for other G7 countries. [100530]

Ms Hewitt: In 1997, the latest year for which figures are available, the UK's gross expenditure on research and development (GERD) was £14.6 billion. This represented 1.87 per cent. of GDP.

The table shows comparative G7 figures.

1997 GERD as a percentage of GDP

Country	*Percentage*
Canada	1.60
France	2.23
Germany	2.31
Italy	1.08
Japan	2.89
UK	1.87
USA	2.71

Source:
OECD Online-Main Science and Technology Indicators, 3 August 1999

Young Business People

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he is taking to encourage young business people to become world-class entrepreneurs. [100548]

Ms Hewitt: The creation of the Small Business Service will ensure world-class support for developing small business. The Enterprise Fund improves access to finance and the recently announced Phoenix Fund will stimulate the development of enterprise in deprived areas.

The DTI supports Young Enterprise and is committed to work with YE and private sector companies to develop the Company Programme model into Higher Education with a view to encouraging young people to consider setting up their own business.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Firearms

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will lay before Parliament the tenth annual report of the Firearms Consultative Committee. [102606]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have placed a copy of the annual report of the Firearms Consultative Committee in the Library.

Terrorism Legislation

Mr. Darvill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish a summary of the responses to the consultation paper, "Legislation against Terrorism". [102607]

Mr. Straw: I have today published a summary analysis of the responses to the consultation paper "Legislation against Terrorism". Copies of this have been placed in the Library and the Vote Office.

Scottish Devolution

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the bilateral concordat between his Department and the Scottish Executive. [102609]

Mr. Straw: I am pleased to announce that my officials have agreed the text of a bilateral concordat with their counterparts in the Scottish Executive. A copy has been placed in the Library.

Hunting with Dogs

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will announce the full membership and terms of reference of the inquiry into hunting with dogs in England and Wales. [102608]

Mr. Straw: The full membership of the Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs in England and Wales will be as follows:

The Chairman will be the noble Lord Burns, as already announced. Dr. Victoria Edwards, Professor Sir John Marsh, the noble Lord, Lord Soulsby of Swaffham Prior and Professor Michael Winter have agreed to serve as members.

The Terms of Reference are:

To inquire into:

the practical aspects of different types of hunting with dogs and its impact on the rural economy, agriculture and pest control, the social and cultural life of the countryside, the management and conservation of wildlife, and animal welfare in particular areas of England and Wales;

the consequences for these issues of any ban on hunting with dogs;

how any ban might be implemented; and

to report the findings to the Secretary of State for the Home Department.

Biographical Details of Members are:

Lord Burns—formerly Permanent Secretary to Her Majesty's Treasury (1991–98), and Chief Economic Adviser to the Treasury and Head of the Government Economic Service (1980–91).

Dr. Victoria Edwards FRICS FAAV—Principal lecturer in Land Management and Departmental Research Director, University of Portsmouth (since 1989); Non-executive Board Member: Countryside Agency (since 1998) and Forestry Commission (1999) and Member, Advisory Councils of, School of Rural Economy and Land Management, Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester (since 1996).

Professor Sir John Marsh CBE—Emeritus Professor of Agricultural Economics, University of Reading, Department of Agricultural and Food Economics (since 1997); Member of Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Minister's Independent Advisory Group (since 1997); Chairman, Agricultural Wages Board (1991–99) and Director of the Centre for Agricultural Strategy (1990–97).

Lord Soulsby of Swaffham Prior MA (Cantab) PhD DSc DVM DVSM FAMS FRCVS—Emeritus Professor of Animal Pathology, University of Cambridge; President, Royal Society of Medicine; Chairman: Veterinary Advisory Committee, Horserace Betting Levy Board (1985–97); Chairman, Animal Research Grants Board (1986–89); and President, Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (1984–85).

Professor Michael Winter—Professor of Rural Economy and Society, Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education (since 1993), Member, Policy Committee, Council for Protection of Rural England (since 1998); Member, two Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Regional Agri-Environmental Forums (since 1996) and Director, Centre for Rural Studies, Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester (1987–93).

Jury Trial

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many and what percentage of defendants who opted for trial by jury in either-way offences and pleaded guilty at the Crown court were committed together with co-defendants who contested indictments at the Crown court, in the most recent year for which figures are available; [99562]

(2) how many and what percentage of defendants who opted for trial by jury in either-way offences and pleaded guilty in the Crown Court pleaded guilty to *(a)* charges or *(b)* counts different from those upon which they were committed, in the most recent year for which figures are available; [99563]

(3) how many and what percentage of defendants who opted for trial by jury in either-way offences and pleaded guilty at the Crown court received sentences at the Crown court which could not have been passed by the committing magistrates court, in the most recent year for which figures are available. [99561]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In 1998, 42 per cent. of the 40,000 defendants who pleaded guilty to either-way offences in the Crown court received sentences which could not have been passed by the committing magistrates courts. These figures relate both to cases directed by the magistrates and to those where the defendant has elected; it is not possible to separate them.

The other information requested is not collected centrally.

Departmental Estate

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is of the value of land and buildings, both leasehold and freehold, held by his core Department (i) in Scotland, (ii) in the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) in total; and what is the value of *(a)* plant, machinery and vehicles, *(b)* IT and communications equipment and systems and *(c)* other taxable fixed assets. [99821]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Currently, the core Home Office holds land and buildings, both leasehold and freehold, valued at £92,462,000, all of which are in England and Wales.

Plant, machinery and vehicles are valued at £12,077,000; Information Technology and communications systems and equipment are valued at £12,633,000; and other tangible fixed assets are valued at £7,368,000.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is of the value of land and buildings (i) in Scotland, (ii) in the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) in total held by *(a)* the UK Passport Agency, *(b)* the Forensic Science Service, *(c)* the Fire Service College, *(d)* the Prison Service and *(e)* each of the non-departmental public bodies within his Department's responsibility; and what is the value of other assets held by these bodies. [99822]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* As of 31 March 1999, the estimates of the value of land and buildings and other assets held by the United Kingdom Passport Agency, the Forensic Science Service, the Fire Service College and the Prison Service are set out in the table. All land and buildings are held in England and Wales.

£000

	Land and buildings	*Other assets*
United Kingdom Passport Agency	—	1,646
Forensic Service College	16,227	12,207
Fire Service College	10,591	8,065
Prison Service	4,225,200	90,500

Unfortunately, information on assets held by the Home Office's non-departmental public bodies is not centrally available and will need to be collected. I will write to the hon. Member when the information is available to me.

Detention Centre, Oakington

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when planning permission was obtained for the proposed detention centre at Oakington; what conditions were attached to the permission by the planning authority; and which of those conditions his Department does not intend to accept. [101340]

Mrs. Roche: Planning permission was obtained from South Cambridgeshire District Council on 10 November 1999. The Council proposed the following "conditions":

After three years, the use will be discontinued unless in the third year the Secretary of State notifies to the Local Planning Authority the need for a further year (and so on on a yearly basis) and shall take account of representations made by the Local Planning Authority when any such extensions are proposed;

There shall not be accommodated at the Centre any persons known to have committed within the last five years any criminal offence which if committed in England and Wales would be an imprisonable offence;

There shall not be accommodated at the Centre any persons known to have an infectious, notifiable disease;

No detainee shall be allowed to leave the Centre other than under escort;

The site of the Centre shall not be extended nor anything built thereon without further consultation under Circular 18/84: Crown land and Crown development;

Detainees not deported will not be placed in South Cambridgeshire District;

The number of detainees shall not materially exceed 400; and

For so long as the Centre is in use, the Secretary of State shall cause to be set up a Local Liaison Committee consisting of Home Office representation, a representative of the operators, the Local Planning Authority and the local communities. The Local Liaison Committee shall meet as often as is requisite but at least annually to discuss, avoid and resolve any local community problems arising out of the use of the site as an immigration reception centre.

My officials will shortly be writing to South Cambridgeshire District Council to confirm Home Office acceptance of the planning issues and to indicate that we broadly agree with the other points.

Police Recruitment (Graduate Scheme)

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the ethnic balance of successful candidates in the police accelerated scheme for graduates. [101600]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Graduate Liaison Office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary makes strenuous efforts to attract applications to the Accelerated Promotion Scheme for Graduates (APS(G)) from high calibre graduates, irrespective of background. However, there is still some way to go to improve the numbers and quality of ethnic minority candidates and their subsequent success at the various stages of the selection process.

The ethnic balance of the APS(G) was examined in the context of an ongoing review of the Scheme. A number of recommendations are under consideration including the way in which the Scheme is marketed, the possible appointment of a Graduate Liaison Officer with a specific responsibility for ethnic minority candidates, and the setting of targets for ethnic minority recruitment.

The Assessment and Consultancy Unit (ACU), which designs and monitors the final assessment centre selection for the scheme, has already let a contract for an Equal Opportunities audit of this part of the process. ACU is also committed to conducting follow-up research on candidates who do join the scheme, with a view to validating the selection process and informing the qualities which should be sought in good applicants from any background.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will ensure that cultural questions facing Police Accelerated Scheme for Graduates candidates are not discriminatory. [101601]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Selection for the APS(G) involves several stages, with preliminary selection taking place in police forces. The Home Office issues guidance to all forces on the conduct of their Force Boards, with specific reference to ensuring fairness to all applicants.

The final assessment centre (known as the Extended Interview) involves a wide range of tests and exercises, designed to give every candidate maximum opportunity to demonstrate his or her competencies and also to promote maximum objectivity in assessment. All assessors receive training from the Assessment and Consultancy Unit for

this task, and the Director and Co-Directors of Police Extended Interviews monitor the process to ensure consistent standards and fairness. Every effort is made to ensure that the questions and tests used are not unfair to any group of candidates. Before being used at assessment centres, new exercises are trialled with typical samples of the candidate population, including ethnic minority candidates.

A contract for an equal opportunities audit of the extended interview process has recently been let in order to obtain an independent assessment of the fairness of the process and to identify areas for further improvement.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters to him dated 9 August, 16 September and 14 October from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Briken Qinami. [101806]

Mrs. Roche: I am very sorry my right hon. Friend has not received a reply to his letters. I will be writing to him shortly.

National Black Police Association

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what message he sent to the inaugural meeting of the National Black Police Association. [101598]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I sent two messages of support to the inaugural meeting of the National Black Police Association. One was a written message that was printed in the conference programme. The other was a short video message, which was shown at the conference.

In both messages, I set out the Government's continued commitment to tackling racism and promoting equality of opportunity, as well as my support for the work and aims of the National Black Police Association.

I thanked the police service as a whole for the way in which they have responded quickly, not only to the message of the Lawrence report, but to the recommendations. I also sent my congratulations to the National Black Police Association for all they have achieved during the past 12 months. I made it clear that, if we are to achieve our shared vision; not only of a police service that is representative of the community it serves, but also one that positively celebrates within its ranks and attitudes the diversity of society, then we must all work together.

Road Accidents

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the contribution that modern technology can make to speedier on-the-scene accident analysis to reduce congestion after road collisions. [101683]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Work in this field, particularly on the use of precision photographic techniques from which precise accident measurements can be derived, is being taken forward by the police service.

Criminal Justice (Mentally Disordered People)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the National Schizophrenia Fellowship's reports "Picking up the Pieces: Mental Illness and the Criminal Justice System" and "The National Diversion/Liaison Scheme Register"; and if he will implement the recommendation that mental health awareness skills should be part of a minimum training package for all police officers. [100808]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government welcome the publication of these reports, which discuss important aspects of managing the response to mentally disordered people who come into contact with the criminal justice system. Effective local inter-agency arrangements around the country are essential if their needs are to be addressed properly. The Home Office and Department of Health are working together to encourage local agencies and services to develop the most suitable arrangements in the light of local circumstances. I understand that police officers in both the Metropolitan Police and other forces in England and Wales receive formal training on mental illness as part of their probationer training. It is open to chief officers to provide additional training on this subject if there is a particular need for it.

City Status

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects an announcement on which towns have been granted city status. [101967]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Her Majesty the Queen has said that she intends to mark the Millennium by a grant of city status and a competition was announced in May of this year with a closing date of 1 September. No date has yet been set for the announcement of the result.

Asylum Seekers

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the Scottish local authorities which have responded to his Department's request, for the purposes of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999, to identify accommodation that they regard as suitable for asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [101707]

Mrs. Roche: Discussions are ongoing with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, with regard to identifying accommodation for asylum seekers in connection with the new arrangements for support under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Responses from individual local authorities are being treated as confidential at this stage.

Police Disciplinary Notices

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many senior police officers in Cleveland have been served with Regulation 6 disciplinary notices in connection with Operation Dollar; and if he will make a statement. [102090]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 392W.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Football

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the football matches which are in category A under Part IV of the Broadcasting Act 1996 as amended. [102096]

Janet Anderson: All matches in the finals tournament of the FIFA World Cup and the European Football Championships, the FA Cup Final and the Scottish FA Cup Final (in Scotland) were included as Group A events in the list of events maintained under Part IV of the Broadcasting Act 1996 which was announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 25 June 1998, *Official Report*, column 601W. The revised list had effect from that day.

Lottery Terminals

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what discussions he had with the National Lottery Commission prior to the announcement that existing lottery terminals will be required to be replaced in the event of a new operator being appointed to run the national lottery; [102142]

(2) what estimate he has made of the cost of replacing all existing lottery terminals; [102141]

(3) what estimate he has made of the cost to the Good Causes Fund of writing off the value of existing lottery terminals. [102140]

Mr. Chris Smith: The decision to require the successful applicant for the new National Lottery licence to install new terminals was taken by the National Lottery Commission. I had a meeting with the National Lottery Commissioners on 29 November 1999 at which they briefed me on the contents of the announcement made the following day. The Commission is independent of Government and neither I, nor any other Minister, had any say in this decision.

The National Lottery Commission has a statutory responsibility to ensure that the National Lottery is run with all due propriety, to protect the interests of players, and subject to satisfying those two criteria, to maximise the amount the Lottery raises for good causes. The Commission took the view that a competition is the best way to ensure that the amount raised for good causes is maximised, and therefore insisted on new technology for National Lottery terminals to remove an obstacle to competition.

I have made no estimate of the cost of replacing the existing National Lottery terminals.

HEALTH

General Medical Council

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve Governmental supervision of the work of the General Medical Council. [100738]

Ms Stuart: We have stated our commitment to professional self-regulation of the healthcare professions, provided such arrangements can be modernised to offer patients appropriate protection.

We will work with the professions, the regulatory bodies, the National Health Service and patient representative groups to strengthen the existing systems of professional self-regulation by ensuring that they are open, responsive and publicly accountable.

The General Medical Council is making good progress in its proposals to introduce arrangements for the revalidation of doctors' registration. These will be underpinned in the NHS by arrangements for continued professional development announced in "A First Class Service" and the Chief Medical Officer's proposals for the annual appraisal of all NHS doctors announced in "Supporting doctors, protecting patients". The same document set out the modern principles of professional self-regulation against which the General Medical Council and other bodies will be judged.

Children in Care

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures the Government are taking to strengthen the role of the corporate parent to ensure that looked-after children reach their full potential. [100735]

Mr. Hutton: On 21 September 1998, we launched the £375 million three-year Quality Protects Programme which is designed to improve the management and delivery of children's social services. There is a particular emphasis on improving the life chances of children looked after by local authorities.

Chief executives have an important responsibility for ensuring that their council acts as corporate parents to the children in their care and that all council departments play their part in the implementation of Quality Protects. Chief executives are required to approve the Quality Protects Management action plan and to ensure that it is not seen solely as a Social Services document.

As part of the Quality Protects programme the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Health have jointly drafted guidance on the education of children looked after by local authorities. This is specifically aimed at assisting local authorities in their role of corporate parent to promote and support the education of their looked-after children.

Elected councillors have a vital role to play in ensuring that Quality Protects has the corporate commitment needed to deliver good life chances for vulnerable children. The Government in partnership with the Local Government Association have recently sent a Guide on Quality Protects to all councillors reminding them of their corporate parent responsibilities and giving guidance on their role in implementing Quality Protects.

We believe that local authorities' responsibilities towards young people in and leaving care should correspond more closely to those of responsible parents. That means providing more support and assistance for children beyond the age of 16. The Children (Leaving Care) Bill, which had its Second Reading in the House of Lords on 7 December, will change the system to give young people the support they need and deserve in

preparing for and leaving care. Young people in and leaving care should be able to expect this from their corporate parent.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what resources the Government are planning to set aside to provide training for foster carers and residential care staff about the education system and on ensuring that children in their care are in appropriate education. [100721]

Mr. Hutton: We are providing £2 million funding through a sub-programme in the training support programme (TSP) in 1999–2000 for training foster carers, with emphasis being put on the attainment of level 3 of the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Award "Caring for Children and Young People". This award contains a unit of competence entitled "Promote and Maximise Educational Opportunities and Achievements for Individual Children and Young People", which describes best practice in supporting children and young people to sustain and/or access educational or learning opportunities, or return to education. It is intended to continue this sub-programme for the next two years at the same rate.

The TSP also includes a £2.5 million sub-programme for residential child care staff to attain their level 3 NVQ in the "Caring for Children and Young People" award. This programme will also continue for the following two years but will rise to £3 million next year.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of this year's school leavers who are looked after by local authorities are in *(a)* further or continuing education, *(b)* employment and *(c)* training. [100737]

Mr. Hutton: Information on the education of looked-after children is not currently collected centrally. The Department has established a new statistical collection to obtain information of this kind from local authorities in England. The first figures will be published during 2001.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many looked-after children *(a)* have statements, *(b)* are placed in day special schools, *(c)* are placed in residential schools and *(d)* are in schools for children with educational and behavioural difficulties. [100733]

Mr. Hutton: At 31 March 1999, about 1,000 looked-after children were placed in residential schools. Information on the numbers of looked after children attending day special schools or schools for educationally and behaviourally difficult children is not collected centrally. The Department has established a new statistical collection to obtain information on outcome indicators for looked-after children, including the numbers with statements of special educational needs. The first figures will be published during 2001.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many local authorities have a designated post with responsibility for the education of looked-after children. [100736]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what targets, including GCSE targets, the Government are setting for looked-after children. [100619]

Mr. Hutton: We have set National Priority Performance Target no. xiii:

> "Improve the educational attainment of children looked after by local authorities, by increasing to at least 50 per cent. by 2001 the proportion of children leaving care at 16 or later with at least a General Certificate of Secondary Education or General National Vocational Qualification; and to 75 per cent. by 2003".

The Quality Protects programme sets out national objectives for improving children's services. Objective 4 focuses on improving the educational outcomes for children looked after

> "to ensure that children looked after gain maximum life chance benefits from educational opportunities, health care and social care".

There are a number of sub-objectives towards bringing the overall performance of looked-after children in National Curriculum tests closer into line with local children generally.

The Department has established three new statistical collections to obtain information about the education, training and employment of looked-after children, both while they are in care and after they have left care. The first figures on educational attainment will be published in the autumn of 2000.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps the Government plan to take to reduce the number of moves in care for looked-after children. [100732]

Mr. Hutton: We are committed to ensuring that children should have as stable an experience as possible while looked after by local authorities. Stability of carer is essential for a child to have a successful outcome from care. The three-year Quality Protects programme, launched in September 1998, has as one of its key objectives to increase the choice of adoption, foster and residential placements for looked-after children because, without a good choice, inappropriate placements are made, which result in placement breakdown. Placement choice is a priority area for expenditure of the children's social services special grant in 1999–2000 and remains a priority for 2000–01. A significant target which we set out in the National Priorities Guidance is for local authorities to ensure that the number of children looked after who have three or more placements does not exceed 16 per cent. by 2001.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps the Government are taking to ensure that local authorities have adequate data on the educational achievements attained and choices post-16 of looked-after children. [100734]

Mr. Hutton: One of the projects within the Quality Protects programme is working with local authorities to determine their basic information requirements for managing and planning children's services. This is exploring both the specification of the data requirements and the systems used to collect and analyse them. Information on the educational attainment of children looked after, and indeed children in need more generally, will certainly be included along with other outcome

measures of children's welfare. The improvement of management information is one of the priorities for expenditure of the children's social services special grant.

Children in Care (Kent)

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children were placed for foster care in Kent by each London borough in the last year for which figures are available; and what the equivalent figures were for the last three years. [101720]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available centrally. The Department is aware, however, that Kent county council is reporting difficulties with the availability of sufficient foster placements, and one possible factor is the number of looked-after children being placed in Kent by London boroughs. The social services inspectorate is currently discussing this issue with directors of social services in London.

The Department has introduced a range of initiatives to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers nationally. Through the Quality Protects programme a key objective is to increase the choice of adoption, foster and residential placements for children in care. Significant additional moneys have been made available to local authorities to increase the level of training for foster carers, and we have also recently announced the development of a national advertising campaign to recruit more foster carers.

Mental Health Act Detainees (Deaths)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Mental Health Act Commission will publish data on the deaths of detained patients; and if he will make a statement. [101065]

Mr. Hutton: Validation of the data for the first two years of systematic collection—February 1997 to January 1999—has taken longer than expected and is still ongoing. The numbers involved in this study are very small for statistical purposes. A preliminary review of the data has indicated that adding a third year's data—February 1999 to January 2000—will increase the strength of the data considerably and increase the possibility that general conclusions may be drawn from the overall study. The Mental Health Act Commission aims to publish a report on the deaths of detained patients by May 2000.

Strokes

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many individuals were treated by each specialist stroke unit in each of the last five years; and what is the average cost for treating an individual in a specialist unit; [100868]

(2) what percentage of those who are registered disabled are disabled as a result of a stroke. [100871]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the format requested.

The Effective Health Care Bulletin of March 1992 on stroke rehabilitation shows that 100,000 first strokes occur in Britain each year. We do not collect figures for the numbers of strokes which cause disability but not death; however, in broad terms there are around 120,000 people in the United Kingdom each year who have a stroke, there are about 56,000 deaths, and of those who survive beyond four weeks about half are left with a significant disability.

NHS Dentistry (Bolton)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will pilot the phone and go National Health Service dental access centres in Bolton. [101318]

Mr. Hutton: Expressions of interest for the third wave of phone and go dental access centres are currently being considered. There are no plans at present to pilot a centre in Bolton.

Care Homes

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to ensure that registration authorities for care homes will be required to *(a)* list staff registered with the General Social Care Council and *(b)* list staff not registered with the General Social Care Council, in annual inspection reports published by registration authorities; [101899]

(2) when he proposes to place proposed legislation for his General Social Care Council before the House; and when he plans for it to become operational; [101901]

(3) if he will create a new quality standard mark that care homes can display in their promotional material to indicate that all staff are registered with a national organisation; [101898]

(4) what duty will be imposed on managers of care homes to register their staff with his planned General Social Care Council. [101900]

Mr. Hutton: The Care Standards Bill, which includes legislative proposals for the General Social Care Council, was introduced into another place on 2 December 1999. We intend to establish the General Social Care Council on 1 April 2001.

We intend that the General Social Care Council will have the power to open a register for social care staff. In order to register with the Council an individual worker will need to have completed satisfactorily a period of training approved by the Council and to have satisfied the Council as to his or her being otherwise competent and safe to practice in social care.

When the Government believe that it will be a further safeguard to the public to restrict certain jobs to workers who are registered with the Council my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will seek to make regulations for that purpose. Meanwhile there are no plans to offer a logo that can be displayed by care homes to indicate that staff are registered with the Council. The Care Standards Bill also contains proposals to create the National Care Standards Commission to register and regulate care homes. Registration with the Commission will be an appropriate indication that standards of quality are being monitored in a care home by a Government-sponsored body.

There are no plans to include information about staff registered with the General Social Care Council in inspection reports by the National Care Standards Commission.

Agency Nurses

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the NHS paid for agency nurses in 1998–99, broken down by NHS region. [101968]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

SCOTLAND

GM Food

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the research funded by his Department into genetically modified food and crops giving *(a)* the research project title, *(b)* the project reference number, *(c)* the research contractors, *(d)* the date on which the research was completed or is due to be completed and *(e)* the date on which the results will be published. [101754]

Dr. Reid: The specific matters raised are devolved and are now for the Scottish Parliament.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Primary Education

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she plans to meet Government leaders of developing countries to discuss their commitment to improving primary education. [100872]

Clare Short: We are committed to the International Development Targets of achieving universal primary education by 2015 and gender equality in primary and secondary schooling by 2005. In my meetings with representatives of developing country governments, I take every opportunity to discuss their commitment to, and progress in, achieving these targets.

I will participate in the World Forum on Education in Dakar next April and will try to ensure that we make the most of this opportunity to reaffirm the commitment to the world community to the educational vision and principles of Jomtien. At Dakar we will assess the progress that has been made since Jomtien and will pay particular attention to analysing why some countries, including some of the poorest, have managed to achieve considerably more than others. We hope to achieve a strong commitment from the North and the South to the implementation of strategies for achieving effective education for all by 2015.

EC Reconstruction Programmes

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is her policy on the establishment of an agency charged with the implementation of European Community reconstruction programmes, as set out in the Cologne Presidency Conclusions. [101106]

Clare Short: My Department's policy is to encourage the EC to devolve more authority from Brussels to its overseas delegations. This should improve the EC's responsiveness to beneficiary countries and its co-ordination with other donors. I therefore fully support the establishment of an EC agency responsible for the delivery of long-term reconstruction assistance to Kosovo. This agency will have its operational centre in Pristina and administrative headquarters in Thessaloniki. We will monitor the agency to ensure that it is effective and based on sound economic principles.

Southern Africa

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what funding her Department has provided to the regional action programme on small arms in southern Africa. [101928]

Clare Short: Last year we funded a seminar which drafted the regional action programme on small arms, subsequently endorsed by US/SADC Ministers in Vienna.

We have also made a grant of up to £80,000 available to Saferworld and the South African Institute for Security Studies to enable them to help all interested parties in taking this programme forward.

We will continue to support the effort to reduce the number of small arms in Southern Africa.

Commonwealth Development Corporation

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on progress towards creation of the Commonwealth Development Corporation public private partnership. [102476]

Clare Short: CDC was transformed into a public limited company (with the name "CDC Group plc") on 8 December. I will place copies of the company's memorandum and articles of association, and of its investment policy and statement of business principles, in the Library of the House.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Entry Clearance Officers

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what audit is done on the performance and operation of entry clearance officers in British embassies and consulates. [101910]

Mr. Vaz: The performance and operation of individual entry clearance officers (ECOs) in overseas Posts is assessed in the first instance by their Entry Clearance Managers (ECMs). ECMs are required to review all refusal decisions taken by ECOs within 24 hours, and to review a percentage of visas issued within a defined timescale.

In common with all FCO staff, ECOs, both UK based and locally engaged, receive annual appraisals of performance which are carried out by Line Managers.

As part of the overall management of the entry clearance operation overseas, the FCO's Migration and Visa Division (MVD) monitors key performance indicators from data sent by overseas posts in monthly and annual statistical returns.

The data allow the Division to monitor and analyse Posts' and ECO's performance to ensure that best use is being made of available resources.

In addition, MVD carries out operational reviews of Entry Clearance Sections. These, together with Reviews carried out by Internal Audit teams and the Management Consultancy Service of the FCO, provide a further means of monitoring the performance of Entry Clearance staff and Posts.

The Independent Monitor (Asylum and Appeals Act 1993), Dame Elizabeth Anson DBE, JP, DL, also carries out independent checks of applications refused which do not carry a right of appeal. Her Annual Report is laid before Parliament.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what training is made available to foreign nationals working in the entry clearance offices of British embassies and consulates. [101911]

Mr. Vaz: All entry clearance officers, regardless of nationality, attend an initial three week training course in London.

Locally engaged clerical staff and other support staff receive desk training in their overseas Posts supplemented by distance learning packages supplied by the FCO. Many also benefit from attendance on our three day regional training courses conducted in all regions of the world on a three year cycle by visiting training staff from London. Where numbers merit it, separate training is provided for interpreters.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Tony Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment his Department has made of whether investing in the National Ignition Facility is consistent with Britain's obligations under *(a)* the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and *(b)* the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; and if he will make a statement. [102130]

Mr. Hain: HMG are fully committed to fulfilling our obligations under the NPT and the CTBT. This investment is fully consistent with those obligations and will ensure that the United Kingdom has the capability to underwrite the integrity of our nuclear warheads without recourse to nuclear testing.

Mr. Tony Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had with colleagues prior to the Government's decision to invest in the National Ignition Facility; and if he will make a statement. [102129]

Mr. Hain: None. The decision to invest in the National Ignition Facility was taken by the Secretary of State for Defence.

Ghana

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made on human rights issues to the Government of Ghana in the last two years; and if he will make a statement. [101974]

Mr. Hain: Over the last two years, we have regularly raised our concerns over the Trokosi system with the Ghanaian Government and with the Ghanaian High Commissioner in the UK. We maintain contact with the Commissioner for Human Rights and Administrative Justice in Ghana and have supported projects promoting human rights. We continue to monitor the human rights situation and welcome information from NGOs on human rights in Ghana.

Departmental Salaries

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in what currency the total of each salary paid to employees of his Department is expressed on his Department's computer systems. [102066]

Mr. Hain: Details of salaries paid to UK based staff are not held on the FCO's computer systems. Salary calculations are carried out by use of a private sector bureau. Employee pay slips show net salaries in sterling and the equivalent Euro amount.

Arms Brokers

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Ministry of Defence on the establishment of an arms broker company list; and if he will make a statement. [101925]

Mr. Hain: The Government are considering the question of controls on the involvement of UK persons in the trafficking or brokering of arms and other goods controlled for strategic reasons as part of the review of the proposals in the White Paper on Strategic Export Controls of July 1998, in the light of comments made by respondents to the White Paper. The Government will announce proposals for new export control legislation following conclusion of the review.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement concerning last month's meeting of the Working Group on Arms Exports on the issue of the control of arms brokers. [101927]

Mr. Hain: The CFSP Working Group on Conventional Arms Exports met on 25 November and discussed a range of issues relating to arms transfers, including possible controls on trafficking and brokering. There was widespread recognition of the need for EU member states to give serious attention to the problem of trafficking and brokering. Member states also acknowledged, however, the potential difficulties of uniform EU-wide action, given their different national approaches to regulation of the arms trade and to the question of extraterritorial legislation, as well as the need to consider the inter-pillar implications of any new controls. The Working Group agreed to exchange further views on how to take forward discussion of this issue under the Portuguese Presidency. The UK will continue to play a constructive role.

Indonesia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Indonesian Government regarding West Papua and Aceh. [101924]

Mr. Battle: We maintain a regular dialogue with the Indonesian Government through which we discuss a range of issues, including the situations in Irian Jaya and Aceh. Our Embassy in Jakarta monitors closely events in Irian Jaya and Aceh, including by periodic visits to the provinces. Teams from the Embassy last visited Irian Jaya and Aceh on 25 November-2 December and 22–24 November respectively, where they met senior officials, opposition leaders, non-governmental organisations and human rights groups. I last met the Ambassador on 25 November and discussed these matters with him.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

General Commissioners of Income Tax

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department for what reasons the Acton and Kensington Advisory Committee on Appointment of General Commissioners of Income Tax has been without a chairman since 1997. [101724]

Jane Kennedy: The Acton and Kensington Advisory Committee on General Commissioners of Income Tax has been without a chairman since 1997 following the failure of the Committee to recommend a successor. The work of the Committee is being undertaken by the Lord Chancellor's Department while arrangements for the future are being considered.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many general commissioners of income tax there were in the Acton and Kensington area on *(a)* 1 April 1996, *(b)* 1 April 1997, *(c)* 1 April 1998 and *(d)* 1 April 1999. [101725]

Jane Kennedy: The number of general commissioners of income tax in the Acton and Kensington area on the dates specified were:

1 April 1996—40

1 April 1997—40

1 April 1998—40

1 April 1999—39.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many of the advisory committees on appointment of general commissioners of income tax in England and Wales are without chairmen. [101726]

Jane Kennedy: There are three without chairmen: Dyfed Ceredigion Advisory Committee, Acton and Kensington Advisory Committee and Westminster and Southwark Advisory Committee.

Bilateral Concordat (Scotland)

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects to publish the bilateral concordat between the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Scottish Executive. [102478]

Jane Kennedy: I am pleased to announce that my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor and the Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice have agreed the text of the Concordat between the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Scottish Executive. Copies of the Concordat have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses, and the text is available on the Lord Chancellor's Department website (www.open.gov.uk/lcd—see 'What's New?').

I hope that the Concordat will mark the beginning of a fruitful and co-operative working relationship between the Department and the Executive.

PRIME MINISTER

Rural Economies

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Prime Minister when he will publish the Performance and Innovation Unit's report on rural economies. [102550]

The Prime Minister: The Performance and Innovation Unit report "Rural Economies" will be published tomorrow and copies will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

CABINET OFFICE

Task Forces

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what rules apply to the selection and conduct of appointees to Government Task Forces. [100893]

Mr. Stringer: Task Forces are set up to report on a specific issue within a specified timescale. There are no formal rules relating to the selection and conduct of appointees. Members are drawn from the public and private sectors, and are appointed for their particular knowledge, hands-on experience and/or expertise.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what has been the cost of setting up and servicing the Task Forces established by the Government since 2 May 1997. [100895]

Mr. Stringer: The information requested is not held centrally, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. Individual Ministers are responsible for decisions to establish Task Forces within their area of responsibility. In most cases, members of Task Forces are unpaid with Departments meeting out-of-pocket expenses only.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many Task Forces have been set up since 2 May 1997; [100896]

(2) if she will list by department the names of people appointed to sit on Task Forces established since 2 May 1997. [100894]

Mr. Stringer: Details of Task Forces established since May 1997 have been deposited in the Library. Those Task Forces which are classified as Non-Departmental Public Bodies are excluded from the table as information on them is published in the annual "Public Bodies" publication. The table provides the name of the Chairman of individual Task Forces as well as a breakdown of membership between the private, public and voluntary sectors. More detailed information on the individuals appointed to each Task Force is not held centrally, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

TREASURY

Financial Services (Self-regulation)

Mr. Love: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many financial services company staff have been disciplined by the regulator in each of the last 10 years; how many of those staff lost their employment as a result; and if he will make a statement. [99640]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The number of individuals disciplined by the self-regulatory organisations since 1990 are as follows:

Calendar year	*Number*
1990	3
1991	5
1992	13
1993	10
1994	34
1995	22
1996	38
1997	35
1998	24
1999 (to date)	17
Total	201

Formal disciplinary action against individuals by the self-regulatory organisations can take several forms. These include public reprimand, fine, imposition of conditions on employment or termination or suspension of an individual's personal registration.

These numbers do not include instances of shortcomings among other staff which have been dealt with by other internal corrective procedures within their employer firms. Such action can, for instance, include retraining or even dismissal. The regulators do not monitor the number of staff dismissed as a result of their disciplinary action.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the impact on tax revenues of the national minimum wage. [101304]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The Government have provided evidence to the Low Pay Commission, which is due to report by the end of the year on the initial impact of the National Minimum Wage. A copy of this evidence is available in the House of Commons Library.

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many people he estimates have benefited from the national minimum wage in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* Wales, *(c)* Bristol, *(d)* Greater London, *(e)* Cornwall, *(f)* the West Country and *(g)* Cumbria; [101302]

(2) how many public sector workers have benefited from the national minimum wage. [101303]

(3) how many unskilled workers he estimates have benefited from the national minimum wage. [101306]

(4) how many families he estimates have benefited from the national minimum wage. [101305]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answers 6 December 1999]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Jim Murphy, dated 9 December 1999:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your four recent parliamentary questions about people who have benefited from the national minimum wage. I am replying in Dr. Holt's absence.

Definitive estimates on the number of people that have benefited from the national minimum wage are not yet available. Currently available estimates for assessing the effect take data from both the New Earnings Survey and the Labour Force Survey and adjust them for known limitations in each. However, the latest adjusted estimates are based on data for the spring (March—May) 1999 Labour Force Survey and this period spans the introduction date for the national minimum wage legislation. As a result, the adjusted estimates may be giving a misleading picture of the effect of the minimum wage legislation since employees might legitimately have been earning below the minimum wage rates in March 1999.

The currently available estimates were published in an ONS First Release on 14 October and show that the number of people earning below the minimum wage rates fell significantly between 1998 and 1999. A copy of this first release will be available in the House of Commons Library.

Funerals

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to regulate the pre-payment of funerals. [102122]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury is still considering the responses to the consultation it held earlier this year and will announce its decision in due course.

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many public interest immunity certificates each Treasury Minister has signed since May 1997 *(a)* in respect of and *(b)* at the request of, which Department, board and agency; and on what dates. [101812]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Treasury Ministers have signed no public interest immunity certificates since May 1997.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many top rate taxpayers will be eligible to receive the Working Families Tax Credit in the next financial year; [101810]

(2) how many households with an income of over £25,000 will be eligible to receive the Working Families Tax Credit in the next financial year. [101813]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 5 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 419W.

Taxation (Administrative Costs)

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the administration costs associated with collecting VAT in each of the last five years. [101906]

Dawn Primarolo: The administrative costs of collecting VAT are shown in the published Annual Report of the Commissioners of Customs and Excise, at Table B, and are described as the "Cost of Collection of VAT". The costs given include running and non running costs and are net of Appropriations in Aid.

The figures for 1994–95 are shown in the Annual Report for the year ending March 1996. 1995–96 and 1996–97 figures are shown in the Annual Report for the year ending March 1997. 1997–98 and 1998–99 figures are shown in the Annual Report for the year ending March 1999.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the administration costs to the Inland Revenue, incurred in assessing eligibility for each *(a)* income tax and *(b)* corporation tax (i) relief, (ii) threshold and (iii) allowance in each of the last five years. [101907]

Dawn Primarolo: Breakdowns of the administrative costs are not readily available in the detail requested.

Details of the total costs of administering the Inland Revenue Department can be found on p.53 of the Board of Inland Revenue's Annual Report and the costs of administering each of Income Tax and Corporation Tax, expressed as a ratio of the tax collected can be found in Table 1 (p.33) of the Report.

A copy of the Annual Report can be found in the Library.

Tax Allowances

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost to the Treasury in the *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 1997–98 tax years of the individual basic tax allowance. [101904]

Dawn Primarolo: The costs of the income tax personal allowance in 1996–97 and 1997–98 were published in table 1.6 of the 1997 and 1998 editions of "Inland Revenue Statistics", copies of which are available in the Library. These figures exclude the costs of the extra element for those aged 65 and over and do not cover individuals who are not on Inland Revenue records because their income is below the personal allowance.

Bilateral Concordats

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to publish the bilateral concordats between his Department, the Scottish Executive and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales. [102477]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I am pleased to announce that the texts of the Concordats between the Treasury and the Scottish Executive, and the Treasury and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales, have been agreed between the parties. Copies have today been placed in the Libraries of both Houses, and the texts will be available on the Treasury's website.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the outcome of the most recent meeting of the Standing Committee on Preparations for EMU. [102549]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The most recent meeting of the Standing Committee took place on 18 November 1999. I have arranged for copies of the minutes to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Ghana

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the level of *(a)* bilateral, *(b)* private sector and *(c)* multi-lateral debts with Ghana for each of the past five years; and of this what proportion has been (i) written off and (ii) repaid. [101975]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The World Bank publication "Global Development Finance: Country Tables 1999" gives the following figures on Ghanaian debt for 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997. The latest available year data are not provided on debt write off.

Figures US$ million

	1993	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Level of debt					
Bilateral	916	1,060	1,140	1,121	1,075
Private Sector	308	387	450	430	437
Multi-lateral	2,404	2,700	2,971	3,118	3,179

Amount US$ million

	1993	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Principal repayments					
Bilateral	27	50	43	46	34
Private Sector	47	61	80	98	108
Multi-lateral	41	51	73	54	51
Interest repayments					
Bilateral	28	27	12	35	27
Private Sector	14	19	6	27	26
Multi-lateral	41	35	40	42	40

Small Businesses

Helen Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the impact of recent tax announcements on small businesses. [100539]

Dawn Primarolo: The effects of the tax announcements are shown in the relevant tables of the Red Book. A number of these measures are of particular benefit to small businesses.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 340**

SESSION 1999–2000

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Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
- *Organisations and subjects*—Organisation entries are preferred for material about the general performance, administration and staffing of an organisation (for example, United Kingdom Passports Agency, Standards). Subject entries are preferred for what organisations do as part of their duties (for example, Passports, Fees and charges).

Geographical coverage

- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
- *Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales*—Material relating to the whole of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is indexed under these headings.
- *Places within the UK*—Material about specific towns, areas and institutions is entered under the name of the specific town, area or institution.
- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
- *EC/EU material*—General material about the European Communities and European institutions as bodies is entered under 'European Communities' and 'EC institutions'. Organisational material about specific communities and institutions is entered under the name of the body, for example 'European Coal and Steel Community' or 'European Parliament'. Material about what the Communities and institutions are doing or propose to do is entered under various subject headings beginning 'EC' such as 'EC environmental policy'.

Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
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- *Members' names*—These are given in the form by which the Member prefers to be known.
- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

- *Cross references*—'See' references indicate all the material has been entered under another heading. 'See also' references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.
- *Concept thesaurus*—A copy of the subject thesaurus to POLIS, listing the concept entries used in the index, is available on the Parliamentary website. A hard copy is available from the Head of the POLIS Unit, House of Commons Library, 1 Derby Gate, London, SW1A 2DG (020 7219 6456).

REFERENCES

- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings and written questions:
  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting or is a written question.
- References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings:
  - *Debates etc.* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Sittings in Westminster Hall* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Questions* (which includes written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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